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ADVANCE ON ARKON : VOLUME 1 [OF 6]
PERRY RHODAN
NEO
Leo Lukas
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Perry Rhodan NEO: Volume 13 [Complete]

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Episode 25: Destination Arkon

By Leo Lukas

We earthlings have a talent for breaking big, beautiful things.

Ray Bradbury, “The Mars Chronicles”

“This is the life we choose. The life we lead. And one thing is certain: none of us will go to heaven.”

Max Allen Collins, “Road to Perdition”

“Plus points for speed, minus points for the culinary arts.”

ibidem

Prologue

The Start

You won't believe what happened to me today.

Before you start ranting: yes, it has to do with a man. But no, I didn't do anything stupid. At least, I hope I didn't. At least, nothing that could not have been fixed at the last moment.

Well, aren't you curious? You sound pretty sleepy. Sorry if I woke you up…although, at three o'clock in the afternoon, this should be allowed even on New Year's Day. Among friends. And you're my best friend, Tibor, and you know the most about men, much more than me and the other girls, and anyway I have to tell this story right now, otherwise I'll burst.

You are a treasure. Thank you for listening to me.

So, as you know, yesterday was New Year's Eve. As you also know, I hate this day. I'm really not a killjoy, but planned happiness just isn't my thing. An obligatory good mood does exactly the opposite for me.

Okay, I might find dancing with my partner at midnight romantic—if I had a partner. However, since this is not and was not the case, I had the choice of either staying home alone or combining the unpleasant with the useful. In other words: a chance to do something about the yawning emptiness in my purse. Somehow, my taste in fine shoes just does not get along with my paycheck.

Anyway, I had taken a job as a temporary waitress at the *Stardust Hotel*, at the first official New Year's Eve dinner of the Terran Union. No, Perry Rhodan was not present. Administrator Homer G. Adams was, but you don't find him half as cute…I hardly noticed anything about the speeches and other performances. At such festivities, the invited guests may be bored, but definitely not the staff. We've washed quite a few kilometers of dishes, I can tell you.

Fortunately, at one o'clock in the morning it was time for the staff to clock out. Tipping was plentiful, and although I was dog-tired, I treated myself to a nightcap at the bar. "White Russian," you guessed right. I don't know, I just like it.

Now pay attention. As soon as the bartender had put the glass down in front of me, I was already being talked to by the person next to me.

"White Russian," he says. "But I fear quite the bad quality."

After seven hours of working on my feet, I had absolutely no desire for late-night banter. Besides, the guy was not my type at all: small, fat, bald, around fifty, I guess, so at least ten years too old. To make matters worse, he was wearing a scuffed army jacket, open in the front, so that a white fine-ribbed undershirt was visible. Complete with greasy shimmers.

I was still thinking about whether I should teach him briefly and mercilessly that he definitely isn't my type or better pretend to be dead and act like I didn't hear anything. Then he grabbed my glass and took a sip!

"Wow. Horrible quality is still poor quality," he said with a look of suffering. "Firstly, ice cubes are not possible. Secondly, straws are also prohibited. Because with a classic White Russian, vodka and Kahlúa should be mixed efficiently, but you have to make sure that they do not mix with the cream. The viscous whipped cream is only carefully infused; floating is the technical term. That's why you drink directly from the glass. Only in the mouth do the components unite, and only then does the full creamy, slightly sweetish-tart note of the drink unfold."

As I said, he was anything but my type, outwardly. And I usually don't like overly clever musings either. But the bald man with the bushy eyebrows and the by no means distinctive tooth gap somehow managed not to come across as intrusive or as a know-it-all. Rather, he gave the impression that he was genuinely concerned about my drink. As if he absolutely had to intervene. It seemed...caring, you know? Prudent. Responsible. No, not fatherly! I am sure of that.

Anyway, I refrained from throwing the rest of the cocktail in his face. Instead, I said, relatively perplexed, “Classic or not, it’s enough for me.”

“Nonsense, young lady. What kind of attitude is that? Humanity reaches for the stars, and a being destined for higher things like you is satisfied with such poor drinks? Not on my watch!”

Like a ball of lightning, he whizzed behind the bar and started to look around. The bartender, a Han Chinese with the stature of a basketball center, surprisingly let him, even though he should have been offended. He even diligently handed him the ingredients.

“Here you go,” says the bald man as he switched the glasses. “This is a White Russian. Cheers!”

“Thank you!” I took a sip, and what could I say? “Hmmm.”

He sat back down next to me and beamed at me. But he didn’t speak.

Now I didn’t want to be rude, and so I asked, “Are you a bartender?”

“No. Cook. But almost a ‘White Russian.’ I’m Ukrainian. Born in Kiev. From there, it’s not far to Belarus. My name is Rinat Ugolyev.” He shook my hand. “My friends call me Rhino because of my elegant appearance.”

At least he had self-irony and a certain charm, though they were as rough as his accent.

“Renate van Zutphen,” I introduced myself. At the last moment, I refrained from adding that I was born in Denmark and came to Terrania because I wanted to start over. After all, the latter applies to almost all inhabitants of this still very young city.

Rhino scored another point for not commenting on my name. He neither asked about my origins, nor did he try to construct a commonality from the echo of Renate and Rinat.

This was the moment of deciding whether I wanted to have my

peace and quiet or engage in a conversation with him—at most, for as long as it took to drink a White Russian. I wasn't sure. Strangely, he also hesitated.

The bartender broke the silence. "Another beer, Rhino?"

"No. I have to be ready tomorrow. But I'm hungry."

"My menu includes peanuts with salt or peanuts without salt."

"Sure." Rhino spread his arms, with the jacket sleeves slipping back. His forearms were heavily hairy and tattooed pale blue. "As always, it won't work unless I do it myself. Are you still hungry, Renate?"

Taken by surprise, I truthfully said yes. I hadn't gotten more than a few bites of the staff dinner we were entitled to, literally on the doorstep. No time to sit down, let alone see how it tasted.

"I'll cook something," says Rhino, licking his lips, "upstairs in my room. But better for two. Will you keep me company? I'll just get some things quickly."

Without waiting for my answer, he dashed off towards the hotel kitchen.

Grinning, the gigantic bartender leaned over the counter. "Do you know that many people would pay huge sums to have Rhino cook for them?"

"No?"

"He is the current superstar of fine dining. The rich and famous were at his feet. A table at *Nautilus*, his Moscow restaurant, had to be reserved months in advance. Not even the tsar could just show up hoping for a table."

"Had to? Could?"

"Rhino threw away everything he had built up over the years for Rhodan. The food sequence of the New Year's Eve dinner was compiled and executed according to his specifications. I have not

heard any complaints; quite the contrary. All my bar guests raved about the food."

I caught myself involuntarily salivating. My stomach growled. To distract myself, I emptied the cocktail glass. When I looked up, Rhino was standing in front of me, a basket full of food in each arm.

"Nothing special," he says. "Only three courses. A small mixed carpaccio, a relatively bland, healthy vegetable soup, and finally a tiny, spicy fried piece of crawfish. Something easy; after all, we both want to be able to fall asleep well without the stomach rebelling. Are you in?"

For the rest of the night, even you won't get any details from me, dear Tibor. But rest assured: it was worthy of my silence. The bartender hadn't promised too much. Incidentally, this did not only apply to the culinary art.

Yes, I stayed with Rhino. On the one hand, because it was late or very early, and anyway, only a lonely, much colder bed was waiting for me; on the other hand, because Rhino proved to be a gentleman. He didn't push me. He allowed me to determine each step myself.

Of course, he was a real rascal, no question. Nevertheless, he played with open cards. The tricks he used, and he knew a bunch, he announced in advance. He did not deceive himself or others. He didn't even use deodorant. Rhino is who and what he is.

I never thought that I could get involved with a seemingly unattractive man like him. But...well, it happened.

And it was...hmmm.

Distant thunder woke us up.

Rhino sat up. "What time is it?"

"I don't know," I grumbled. "Certainly too early to get up. Let's keep sleeping, dear. At this time of year, thunderstorms occur quite frequently in the Gobi, I'm told."

“The alarm clock,” Rhino insisted excitedly. “Has the alarm clock gone off yet?”

“Maybe.” Darkly, I remembered that I had silenced an annoying noise with a targeted blow at some point in the middle of the night.

Uttering Slavic curses, Rhino catapulted himself out of bed and ran naked to the window. “The *Tosoma*!” he cried. “She’ll take off at any moment!”

Me and my happiness, I thought sleepily. *We’ve just met and the name of another woman is already in play.*

“What do you want from this Tosora or whatever her name is?” I asked.

“To fly! The *Tosoma* is Rhodan’s spacecraft. I should have been on board at ten o’clock. What time is it?”

Under the bed I found the alarm clock. “Eight minutes to twelve.”

“The start is scheduled for exactly twelve o’clock noon. They are on schedule. Don’t you hear that the engines are already warming up?” While he clattered around like a sparrow, frantically slipping into his clothes. “Do you have a vehicle, Renate?”

“An electric speedster, yes.”

“Two-seater?”

Again, I said yes. “It’s parked in front of the hotel.”

“What are you waiting for? Get dressed, fast! The airfield is located a few kilometers outside the city. There’s no way I can do it on foot. You have to take me there. Please hurry, I beg of you!”

As I said, he had spoiled me a few hours before according to all the rules of the art. I was in serious danger of having a crush on him. Fresh infatuation lasts only a few months, but being able to conjure up a five-star menu with two hotplates and hardly any dishes...,that lasts a lot longer. In this respect, I was torn. On the

one hand, I wanted to help him; on the other hand, I didn't like the idea that I was helping him fly away.

A part of me, the selfish and lazy one, would have liked to succumb to the temptation to dawdle until the last chance to reach the spaceship so that he missed his flight. The other, better part, however, realized that I would always be second to the *Tosoma*, regardless of whether Rhino made it on board or not.

We did not wait for the elevator but stormed down the emergency stairs, taking two steps at a time. It was freezing cold outside. From a climate point of view, Perry Rhodan had chosen a lousy place for the new world metropolis. There really were more pleasant areas than the Gobi desert...

My small electric car, almost a curiosity because it was not from the stocks of the former Chinese siege army, was wedged between two heavy SUVs no more than three finger widths away from their bumpers. Luckily, the wheels could be turned up to ninety degrees, so I could still move it.

"Can't you call them so they'll wait for you?" I asked as we raced through the periphery of Terrania. The outer city had emerged after the end of the siege and grown rapidly, although not quite as fast. It seemed as though the Stardust Tower in the center of the city had literally shot up into the sky. Here, in contrast to the inner city, there were broad arterial roads. But because of the numerous construction sites, I had to take numerous detours.

"Very funny. There are a total of 2,200 people on board. Do you think Commander Thora da Zoltral will stop the launch preparations just because one of the cooks has overslept?"

"The head chef, I suppose."

"A title without value. My colleagues are not fools either. Above all, however, we were unmistakably reminded the day before yesterday during instruction that absolute punctuality is required. As blessed Gorbachev said: 'life punishes those who arrive too late.'"

The chronometer on the dashboard showed three minutes to twelve as we left the last foothills of the city behind us. Now the unobstructed view of the desert landscape of the Gobi and the road that cut it open up lay before us. It ran straight towards the monster that rose in front of the hills on the horizon and made them seem surreal, as if they were not real but the backdrop of a model building diorama.

The *Tosoma* was not huge—it was gigantic. Although still several kilometers away, it seemed overwhelming to me in its steel force.

Of course, I knew from the news of the Arkonide battleship that Rhodan's people had found at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. But neither film footage nor schematic representations were able to reproduce the relations nearly as overwhelmingly as they presented themselves to the naked eye. And certainly not the fantastic story behind it: the *Tosoma* had fallen into the sea ten thousand years ago, shot down in a battle that had caused the continent of Atlantis to sink into the ocean.

"Majestic," I whispered.

"Isn't it?" replied Rhino. With a solemn, almost singing undertone, he enumerated, "It measures exactly eight hundred and three meters and seventy-eight centimeters. Sixteen impulse thrusters in the middle ring bulge accelerate the *Tosoma* at a maximum of five hundred kilometers per second squared. That means within ten minutes to the speed of light!"

"I find it hard to imagine this colossus taking off from the ground at all."

"You will experience it. In..." Rhino looked at the clock. "Not even ninety seconds. Pisdez! Step on the gas, my love!"

I refrained from explaining to him that my speedster ran neither on gas nor on liquid fuel. Anyway, I pushed the last bit of speed out of my little car, and we raced towards the spherical ship. The closer we got to it, the larger it seemed—a mountain of steel resting on twelve comparatively fragile telescopic landing supports.

At a distance of about one kilometer, a wire fence surrounded the provisional airfield, whose glazed exterior was reminiscent of the shimmering, reflective surface of water. Numerous vehicles were parked in front of the fence: various private cars, but also many buses with onlookers. A barrier blocked the access road with about two dozen uniformed men guarding it.

As I slowed down, Rhino said in a rough voice, “No time for lengthy negotiations. I have an ID, but they won’t let me in anymore. Will your car break through the barrier?”

“What?”

“Can we ram the barrier and break through?”

“Are you crazy? Not a chance. This is a lightweight city vehicle with a plastic body, not a bulldozer.”

“That’s what I feared. Bypass the parking lot! Turn right! Let’s go, get off the slopes! Go!”

He must have gone crazy. But so had I, because I followed his instructions. At a good sixty kilometers per hour, we bumped over the uneven ground of sand and gravel. The passenger compartment rattled so much that I almost lost both my sight and hearing. Only with great difficulty did I manage to retain control of the steering wheel.

“Where to?”

“The fence! Where else!”

“Rhino, that’s pointless. Come to your senses! I may break through the wire fence with a lot of momentum, but we’ll be roasted alive in the car when the spaceship starts. We’ll burn up with the car!”

“I know that too. Just take me up to the fence!”

“What are you going to do?”

He gave no answer, but instead gnawed tensely on his lower lip.

In the meantime, the police had become aware of us. Two SUVs took up pursuit. Despite their far better tires and engines, our lead narrowed only gradually.

“By the way, you drive excellently,” Rhino praised me. “If I ever need a getaway driver for a bank robbery—”

“No thanks, this madness here is enough for me.” Secretly, I was happy that the recently completed racing course had paid off.

The last parked vehicles were behind us. I headed for the fence, hitting it hard at full speed while pulling the handbrake. The e-speedster lurched, threatened to roll over, and came to a stop one meter in front of the mesh grid, surrounded by a cloud of dust.

“See you again, Renate!” cried Rhino, grabbing his duffel bag and rushing out. More nimble and skillful than I would have given him credit for, he climbed the fence and jumped down onto the other side. Waving both arms, he took three steps towards the giant ship...

And the *Tosoma* started its engines.

“Hey!” Rhino’s desperate roar even drowned out the roar of the engines. “Hey! Blin! You can’t leave me behind. Who will cook you the best borsht in the galaxy?”

A few hundred meters in front of us, things went into motion. The spherical Arkonide ship took off, not jerkily, but seemingly effortlessly, as if it were suddenly as light as a feather. Without the slightest wavering, it quickly gained altitude.

Rhino lowered his arms and drooped his shoulders. He had tried everything and failed. This adventure, probably—no, *certainly*—the greatest adventure in the history of mankind, would take place without him.

The small, fat man gave in. Slowly he sank to his knees. A part of me, the morally higher one, felt pity. And remorse. I was not entirely innocent in Rhino having missed the departure. But I must admit, the other Renate, however, rejoiced. The Ukrainian chef did

not want to be a beauty. But he had the heart and one or more other organs in the right place.

I began to think about how I could comfort him when something monstrous happened. Rhino, still in a kneeling position, suddenly hovered half a meter above the ground. As if an invisible giant hand had seized him, he was lifted into the air and abruptly torn upwards, tossed back and forth as if by gusts of wind. Only now did I realize that a windstorm was howling over the airfield, deafeningly loud. It also reeked of scorched earth and ozone.

Rhino disappeared into the sky. It occurred to me that the Arkonides had energy traction devices called tractor beams. Such an invisible beam pulled him up to the *Tosoma* like a mosquito to a tennis ball wrapped in a blindingly bright fire.

He had made it after all, at the very last moment. I was happy for him but at the same time, I felt sadness because I had lost him. We hadn't even kissed goodbye.

Well. That's what happened, Tibor.

The police, of course, arrested me but let me go after a short interrogation. It may be that I will receive an administrative penalty, they said, for aiding and abetting unauthorized entry into a high-security zone. But not much will happen to me. Terrania is still young. We have police, but we still lack a prison for the time being. "The rascal you drove here is probably in far worse danger."

I hadn't even thought of that. "The *Tosoma* has a long way to go," I said quietly.

"Certainly. This is humanity's first long-distance interstellar expedition," the officer said. She handed me my identity papers. "Your friend, Perry Rhodan, Reginald Bull, and all the others on board are embarking on an unimaginably long journey. Their destination is called Arkon."

"Yes." A shiver ran down my spine. "Their destination," I repeated, "is called Arkon."

1.

The Arrival

"Fear and terror," said the navigator, a squat Cuban woman named Celia Cienfuegos.

"What?"

"The moons. Phobos and Deimos." She pointed to one of the outdoor observation screens, where two small, irregularly shaped celestial bodies could be seen if you looked very closely. "The names are originally ancient Greek and mean fear or terror."

"Ah. I understand. All I knew was that the planet Mars was named after the Roman god of war."

"I thought you were a historian."

"But not a classical scholar," said Aescunnar. "Incidentally, the allegedly documented past is a construct of the present, more full of holes than Swiss cheese. I am more interested in pre-astronautics. Long ridiculed but, since the discovery of various Arkonide artifacts, suddenly very popular."

"Do you also suspect Mars?" Cienfuegos smiled mockingly. "I mean, do you suspect any mysterious legacies on the Red Planet?"

"Why not? Earth—pardon, Terra—and Venus were important enough for the Arkonides to establish bases there."

"Nothing of the kind is known of on Mars."

"Not yet. We'll see."

On the other screen, the Red Planet grew barely noticeably but steadily. Actually, it was predominantly orange due to the abundant iron oxide dust in the atmosphere and everywhere on the surface. Some light-blue cloud bands, especially at the polar regions, provided contrast.

“The most popular planet of our solar system,” commented the navigator, “in literary terms. And the second smallest. Its diameter of almost 6,800 kilometers is about half as large as that of, um...Terra. Its volume is only slightly more than a seventh of the Earth’s volume.”

“Still fascinating,” Aescunnar replied in admission of his not-so-mild excitement.

Space travel was no longer completely unfamiliar to him. He had flown across the solar system on an Arkonide reconnaissance craft, visited Saturn’s moon Titan along with Eric Manoli and the extremely strange alien who called himself Gucky. But their present journey had turned out to be much more primitive, more down-to-earth, as paradoxical as the term seemed, as it surrounded the infinite, completely bottomless vastness of space.

Compared to the Arkonide ship, the *Schiaparelli XVII* was an open Viking boat as opposed to a luxury cruiser. It was a hybrid spacecraft, stubbed together in the overzealousness of departure for the stars, from human engineering spirit and tried and tested Ferron technology. Far inferior to the technology used by the Arkonides of course, but at the moment, mankind had only two faster-than-light spaceships: the *Tosoma*, unique in its monstrosity, and the smaller, much weaker former Topsidan reconnaissance aircraft *Nesbitt-Breck*, which Perry Rhodan and Reginald Bull had recovered a few months ago along with the Ferron Chaktor from the surface of the hellish planet Gol in the Vega system.

Some designer had felt compelled to take up additional Topsidian stylistic elements on the *Schiaparelli*, which measured around 45 meters, and to vary them “originally.” Therefore, it consisted of two balls connected by a much slimmer cylinder.

A dumbbell, thought Aescunnar. *A dumbbell, as used by weightlifters, in the weightlessness of space. What an inappropriate concept!*

However, the failed design would soon fall into oblivion. After landing on Mars, if it succeeded, the supply ship would have done its duty. It would be disassembled and cannibalized, and the

material would be put to other uses.

“Ares,” said Aescunnar. “That would be a Greek name, wouldn’t it?”

The navigator, who was a biologist by profession, ignored him. She was now devoting all her concentration to the approach maneuver. Celia had told them that she was a real Guantánamera, because she came from the province of Guantánamo, which had gained notoriety at the turn of the millennium due to the US prison camp located there.

Involuntarily, Aescunnar hummed the simple yet catchy melody he associated with it, an evergreen of Terran music history... *“Guan-tána-mera,”* he sang in his head, *“Guajira Guantánamera...”*

Then the ship sagged, shaking violently. The shades shone in slippery bright orange. The surface seemed to jump towards them. Immediately afterwards, the engines counter-thrusted so hard that Aescunnar nearly hit the gray console by a hair.

There was a jolt that hurt, as if Aescunnar was being impaled along his tailbone. Then another, and another.

“We’re here,” Celia Cienfuegos said tersely.

“Get ready to get out!” ordered the ship’s commander.

They stepped out onto Martian soil. Surreally slowly, the whirled up reddish sand descended again.

The ten figures in their chunky space suits also moved as if in slow motion. The gravitational acceleration on the surface of Mars was not even forty percent of that of Earth; gravity was even slightly lower than on the smaller but denser Mercury.

In a single-file line, with strange, swaying steps, they trudged from the landing site of the *Schiaparelli* to a thirty-meter-high, about-four-hundred-meters across transparent dome. The lush greenery behind it seemed out of place, lost, against the surrounding yellow-red wasteland.

A tiny island of hope in the middle of a hostile desert; that was Bradbury Base, the main station on Mars. Its location in one of the Valles Marineris was due to a compromise: at the bottom of the gigantic canyon, up to seven kilometers deep and hundreds of meters wide, the highest air pressure on the planet prevailed, but the disadvantage of slightly lower solar radiation was accepted.

Aescunnar and his companions crowded into an airlock at the base of the dome. After breathing air was pumped in, the bulkhead opened. They stepped through and took off their helmets with a collective sigh.

A tall, slim young woman awaited them. The short haircut and casual clothing indicated that she attached little importance to fashionable appearances. She wore no jewelry and was unvarnished but by no means drab. Gray-blue sparkling eyes betrayed assertiveness and iron will.

“Welcome to Bradbury Base,” she said with a slight French accent. “I’m Louanne Riembau, the interim commander of the Mars mission, and I’m delighted with the supplies from Earth.”

Aescunnar was the last one she greeted with a handshake. When she took his hand, she hesitated, looked at him scrutinizingly, and said, “You are not Professor Hennings.”

“No. Unfortunately, Hennings fell ill shortly before departure. I’m his replacement, Cyr Aescunnar.”

Riembau furrowed his brow. “Why wasn’t I informed?”

“You know how crazy things are in Terrania, even more so at the end of the year. And then there was the departure of the *Tosoma*...”

“Nevertheless, a radio message would not have been too much to ask. You’re also a hydrologist, I suppose?”

“Uhm, no. Historian.”

The station commander gawked at his response. “A historian? On Mars? Has Terrania fully lost its mind?”

“It’s not for me to judge. Administrator Adams was of the opinion—”

“Adams, then,” Riembau interrupted him brusquely. “A favorite. Great. Exactly what we need most here.”

“I don’t think you understand—”

“I understand very well. Wei Si Ping!”

A wiry Asian man, who had remained inconspicuous in the background, hurried over. “Yes, Commander?”

“Put our long-awaited new addition with Hetcher.”

Without another word, she turned away and left Aescunnar standing there.

“That was, I would think, not an optimal start,” said Aescunnar to Wei Si Ping, who led him on winding paths through the garden.

“Don’t take it personally,” Wei said conciliatorily. “Louanne is under a lot of pressure, and the fate of her predecessor weighs heavy on her. But she is a very correct person and spectacularly successful as a scientist. In time, you’ll both get along.”

“What is her area of expertise?”

“Geology. Mine too, by the way. Are you familiar with the mission of the Mars stations?”

“Research with the main goal of exploring the possibility of terraforming the planet?”

“Right. Thankfully, the Ferrons, who have extensive experience with hostile planets from their home system, are helping us. Their technology provides a solid foundation for our work, although it is far from the fairy tale technology of the Arkonides. We can only dream of that here.”

The garden under the dome, Wei explained, served to supply

Bradbury Base with oxygen and food. The station strove for the highest possible degree of self-sufficiency. A field of solar panels not far from the dome provided the required energy. Including the newcomers, the crew now consisted of 196 people, almost exclusively scientists with a background in astronautics.

"I see. I'll probably have to come to terms with my role as the ugly duckling," said Aescunnar, still in a good mood. After all, he had reached his destination safely.

Wei Si Ping led him underground, where the station's residential quarters and other facilities were located. They were all constructed from cylindrical container modules about five meters in diameter and fifteen meters long.

The geologist stopped in front of a door with a sign saying "78" attached. "Here we are. This is your cabin. First of all, relax from the strain of the journey. Hetcher will leave you alone. In four hours, I'll pick you up and show you around the base."

"Thank you very much."

"You're welcome." Wei bowed and disappeared with springy steps around the bend in the aisle.

Aescunnar knocked, a commandment of courtesy to his unknown roommate. No reaction. He knocked a second or third time but still received no response.

Finally, he opened the door.

A man who had been sitting at the table in the narrow cabin looked up in fright, his chair falling over. He was short, stocky, and had blue skin: a Ferron. He stared at Aescunnar wide-eyed.

"I beg your pardon for interrupting. You...are Hetcher?"

The Ferron did not answer. He was visibly struggling to regain his composure.

"My name is Cyr Aescunnar. The station commander has decided that we should share this cabin in the near future. Apparently, you

were not aware?"

His counterpart opened his mouth, but no sound came from his lips. Instead, he waved his arms wildly.

"Uhm...did I say something wrong?" Gradually, the situation began to seem dangerous to Aescunnar. Was the man mentally impaired? But then Wei Si Ping would surely have warned him, wouldn't he? The geologist seemed to be quite a nice guy.

On the other hand, with scientific luminaries, you never knew. Some were alien to life and permanently absent-minded, others like big children who passionately liked to play stupid pranks on newcomers. With horror, Aescunnar thought of a plasma physicist from the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena whom he had met at an interdisciplinary congress. The man was highly qualified but also an incredible pain in the ass. One by no means excluded the other.

His Ferron roommate stopped fumbling. Now he pressed both arms against his skull, grimaced and rolled his eyes.

"If this is some kind of admission ritual," said Aescunnar, "I ask you to stop the joke. I'd like to swap the spacesuit for more comfortable clothes and then lie down a bit."

The Ferron stared at him uncomprehendingly. Then he seemed to remember something. He indicated for Aescunnar to be patient, grabbed a notepad, and doodled on it. Finally, he tore off the note and handed it to the historian.

In scrawled writing was written in English: *"Good afternoon. I'm Hetcher. My ears and tongue are broken."*

2.

Bull Doubts

"In the Great Empire," said Thora da Zoltral, "such insubordination would never be tolerated."

"And yet," Perry Rhodan teased her, "you personally brought our chef on board by tractor beam..."

"Because I can handle it best." Before he could argue that this explanation was unsatisfactory, she continued. "By which I don't want to say anything against our occupation. People are doing well. They have the ancient ship remarkably well under control."

In fact, the crew from the most diverse nations of the world seemed excellently well-rehearsed on the bridge. They radiated serene professionalism, which, incidentally, also applied to Thora, who was in command. The ship's aggregates were operated, controlled, and monitored by means of holographic elements. There were consoles, but they were only used to generate the holo-batteries, which enclosed the individual mission stations in a horseshoe shape.

The *Tosoma* was picking up speed for its first transition. At least fifty percent of the speed of light was needed to enter hyperspace; significantly more was desired. With the speed of entry, not only did the range increase, but the energy consumption also decreased.

The miracle of faster-than-light space travel was an expensive commodity. The only known method, transitioning, consumed enormous amounts of energy. In addition, translight engines took up an enormous amount of space: the majority of the ship's volume. The *Tosoma* was built in three spherical shells. In the inner sphere, which was one hundred meters across, were the bridge, crew quarters, a military hospital, and extensive storage facilities, as well as the pressure absorbers and two fusion reactors. Everything was designed to ensure the survival of the crew in the event of an accident or combat.

The middle spherical shell, six hundred meters thick, three-quarters of the total diameter, contained the transition engine, which in turn consisted of ninety percent empty space. The remaining ten percent was filled by the structural field converters inserted like needles into a stuffing cushion.

In the outer spherical shell, again about a hundred meters thick, protective shield generators, various non-vital devices, and last but not least, the offensive armament were housed: twelve guns at both poles, half disintegrators, and half thermal cannons. On the armored outer shell made of Arkon steel were also twenty-four bays for torpedoes. Of course, these were just as empty as the numerous auxiliary aircraft hangars and the parking spaces provided in the ring bead for the sixty-meter auxiliary aircraft that Thora and Crest referred to as “corvettes.”

Life support systems and accommodation were designed for a maximum of 5,100 people. Over “short” distances such as from Venus to Earth or for the jump to Vega, a minimum crew of 130 was sufficient. Arkon, on the other hand, was located in the globular cluster M 13, 34,000 light-years away, which is why the *Tosoma* had been increased to a full crew strength of 400.

In addition, there were 1,800 passengers: scientists, scholars, technicians, artists, businessmen, all outstanding personalities whom Rhodan was counting on for support when it came to making an impression on Arkon. It was their only hope. Technologically, they were like Stone Age people compared to the Arkonides.

He left Thora, who was focused on initiating the transition, and walked over to Bull, who had just entered headquarters.

“I suppose you gave Rinat a proper dressing down?”

“Certainly. Our rhino has shrunk to the size of a seahorse.” Grinning, the big redhead raised his hand with a gap of a few millimeters between his thumb and forefinger: “That small with a hat. He has sworn high and holy that this will never happen again and promised to pull out all the stops of his art at the next stopover.”

“At the very least!”

They settled into the contoured armchairs and pondered things for a time. Meanwhile, Crest da Zoltral had stepped up to the command post and engaged Thora in a quiet conversation.

Once again, Rhodan noticed how much the Arkonide had changed since his quest for eternal life had been crowned with success. The formerly feeble alien was bursting with energy. He seemed rejuvenated by years—no, decades. His stiff composure signaled competence and serenity as well as an unknown enterprising spirit. His whole manner had also changed: instead of exercising restraint as before, he now interfered much more often in the processes of ship management.

“The two of us are not an old couple,” Bull grumbled, “and we’re not in bed. Nevertheless, I have to ask you: what’s going through your head right now? Do you regret rejecting immortality to save Crest?”

“No. Not really. For him, it was the last chance to survive. Me and you, we’re young and healthy. We have time, so there’s no reason to rush such a serious decision. I’m convinced that I can still attain immortality. If I want it at all.”

“And if *It* plays along.”

It. This was the name of the mysterious creature who had offered eternal life to Rhodan on his strange half-world.

“Of course. But up to this hypothetical point, we’re still independent and free.”

“You think Crest isn’t anymore?”

“Time will tell. *It* has not set any conditions. At least none that I know of...”

As could be seen on the holographic projections, the *Tosoma* was just passing Mars’s orbit.

“Only a few minutes left until the jump,” Rhodan announced.

“Mhm.” Bull was visibly nervous. Again and again, he stroked his hair.

“Everything all right with you?”

“Sure. Sure.” But his blinking gave him away.

“Come on, out with it. You have a bad feeling about it, I know.”

“How couldn’t I? This boat is ten thousand years old. It lay at the bottom of the Atlantic for ten millennia.”

“Arkonide workmanship can withstand it.”

“You don’t need to tell me twice.” In fact, most likely, no one had studied the tangible technology of the Arkonides as intensively as Reginald Bull. “I know what the *Tosoma* is capable of, but also that, according to Thora, it is hopelessly outdated and technically by no means up to date.”

“Do we have to chew this through for the hundredth time? We don’t have any other spacecraft.”

“Don’t get me wrong, Perry; I love the *Tosoma*. The old girl has already rendered us incredibly valuable services. After all, we were able to repel the Topsidan invasion of Vega. But in my opinion, the push for Arkon is simply too early. Thirty-four thousand light years! Even if everything goes without complications, we’llll be traveling for at least a month and a half.”

“As has been discussed for a long time, we don’t have to fly quite that far. Up to the first outposts of the Empire is enough. Then we’ll see.”

“Great plan. And if we end up stranded in the middle of nowhere? What then?”

“Pessimism doesn’t become you, Reg.”

“What you call pessimism, I call prudence.”

“This isn’t like you. You, of all people, who went to the moon and back with little more than an engine under your butt...”

“I had no choice. But this expedition doesn’t have to be as perilous. Not yet, not so hastily. Not with a flying antique.”

“The *Tosoma* is ready for action. The ship’s repair routines have worked wonders.”

“Says who?”

“The ship’s positronics.”

“Exactly. The ship itself claims it’s okay. We, on the other hand, have little opportunity to check this statement for its truthfulness, except in practical application.” Bull slapped the armrest with the flat of his hand. “I’m sticking to my opinion: this trip is madness in practice.”

Perry, who knew that his best friend mainly wanted to let off steam, replied reassuringly, “Madness, perhaps, but necessary. There’s no way around Arkon.”

“Pure madness,” Bull insisted. “Why are we going to Arkon? In truth, we know almost nothing about the Great Empire. Crest is still keeping a low profile. He just talks about this ominous ruler and that Arkon, of all civilizations, desperately needs him, Crest da Zoltral. But do those in power on Arkon see it that way?”

“I trust him. And Thora.”

“Hey, I’m not insinuating that they want to betray us or exploit our goodwill for their own purposes. I have no idea about politics, certainly not about Arkonide politics. But in my humble estimation, Crest has the status of a refugee, if not an exile. On Arkon, they think he’s dead and are happy about it. And suddenly he comes back? With a battleship lost for half an eternity and two thousand two hundred ‘barbarians of Larsaf III’ in tow? Well, if that doesn’t smell like trouble...”

“No one said it would be a walk in the park. But apart from that, what would be the alternative? Ostrich tactics? Bury our heads in

the sand?"

Bull snorted. He didn't like passivity any more than Perry.

"We had visitors like the Fantan," Rhodan continued, "had to fight the Topsidans, all within a few months. Terra is no longer a blank spot on the galactic star map, if it ever was. Sooner or later, the Arkonide Empire will inevitably take notice of us. They're infinitely superior to us. They could destroy us at any time with the snap of a finger."

"That's why we're flying there, in our only battleship worth mentioning: to save them the long journey? They'll say 'thank you' and snap us off with a cold smile along with the lame *Tosoma*. Or they'll take the spherical craft, which, strictly speaking, belongs to them, throw us into the deepest dungeon, and let us rot there."

"Stop painting the devil on the wall!" Slowly, Perry became angry with the discussion going round in circles. They had too often had these conversations. "It would be fatal if we remained idle. Our only chance lies in the flight forward: we establish contact, not the other way around. We have to go to Arkon!"

"Crest does, obviously. And you really want to be there. Why? Because of Thora?"

Perry gave his friend a sharp look. "Because of Terra. With Crest and his foster daughter, humanity has two valuable advocates who undoubtedly have a certain influence. Any turmoil of the past will be cleared up; animosities or misunderstandings can also be cleared up. After all, we're flying into the center of a mighty civilization that's many millennia old."

"Or to our ruin."

Perry was grateful that a warning siren announced their imminent transition and put an end to the fruitless dialogue. Otherwise, he would have been genuinely furious. With Reginald Bull as a doomsayer, even the most patient person wouldn't last long.

Did he imagine it, or did the lights on the bridge flicker a little bit as the *Tosoma* began the transition?

3.

Colony in Distress

Aescunnar had tried to sleep but had managed nothing more than an unpleasant, nerve-wracking drift between waking and dozing. The worst jet lag was a piece of cake against the physical changes that the space flight in the comparatively primitive one-way supply ship and the arrival at the Mars station brought with it.

As promised, Wei Si Ping picked him up after four hours. Of course, he knocked at the exact moment the historian had finally fallen asleep.

"Just come in," he croaked. "It's open."

"You don't look very rested," the geologist remarked.

"I congratulate you on your keen powers of observation."

A hint of a smile flitted across Wei's narrow, austere face. "Unfortunately, the promised tour of Bradbury Base will not come to fruition for the time being. The commander assigned us to maintenance work. Please put your spacesuit back on. We're heading outside."

"Is Riembau hazing me?"

"No. The work is overdue. We've been struggling for weeks under the workload because of staff shortages. The nine colleagues who arrived with you will also be deployed immediately. They're helping with the unloading and simultaneous dismantling of the *Schiaparelli*."

"She's running a tight ship."

"Louanne is doing her best. She's an extremely capable woman, but her job, I'm afraid, would be too much even for Perry Rhodan."

"What are the main difficulties?"

“Later. It would not be conducive to your status within the workforce if we stood out for our lack of punctuality.”

“I see.” Sighing, Aescunnar squeezed himself into the spacesuit again, which he would have preferred to air out for a few days. “What’s next? Digging moats to protect against the vicious Martians?”

“The only living beings on this planet are us. Whether malicious or not, remains to be seen. No, don’t worry, shovels won’t be needed this time.”

They took the same way back, through the sub-planetary facilities and the garden to the airlock. As they walked out quickly, Wei inquired about Aescunnar’s first encounter with Hetcher.

“Well, I wouldn’t exactly call him a chatterbox.” After delivering his written message, the Ferron had rushed back to the table, sat down with his back to Aescunnar, and henceforth not moved.

“Don’t take it personally. Hetcher doesn’t talk to anyone. I guess he wouldn’t even if he could.”

“A word of warning might have been helpful.”

“Yes and no. I didn’t want to miss the slightest chance that he could open up to a stranger who would face him completely without any prejudice.”

“Sorry, it didn’t work.”

“As was to be expected. Not your fault. No one can get close to Hetcher. But his lack of communication doesn’t cause us any problems beyond his inaccessibility. The auxiliary services assigned to him, he does promptly and to the fullest satisfaction. Speaking of which...”

The surface of Mars had lost none of its desolation since the landing of the *Schiaparelli XVII*. Occasional, grotesquely slowing mini-tornadoes, wind swirling the dust, were the only change in the

rust-red wasteland.

Aescunnar had read a lot about the fascination that Mars had long had among Earth's inhabitants, but that fascination hadn't yet occurred to him personally.

Their task was to check the transparent shell of the dome for damage and contamination and, if necessary, remove it.

"Although there are autonomous machines for this, human control has proven to be essential," the geologist explained. "One of many annoying duties that no one is spared. At regular intervals, everyone takes turns unless they are indispensable elsewhere, including the commander herself."

"She has described her position as interim."

"Because she doesn't want to admit that Nguyen, the former commander, isn't coming back. He's been missing for almost two weeks. A mysterious matter—not the slightest trace of him has been found. According to human logic, he must be dead. As Nguyen's deputy, Louanne has taken over the leadership. She's a good woman and, despite her occasionally somewhat gruff nature, is undoubtedly best suited for this post."

"You're defending Riembau valiantly once again. Are you involved with her?"

"Direct answer: no. But I like her and I'm one of her closest confidants."

"I hope I didn't offend you."

"Oh, here we constantly step on each other's toes. Don't worry, it's fine. We appreciate it when someone doesn't hide their concerns."

"Well, I'm certainly the right person for that," Aeuscunnar assured him.

After Wei had shown him what was important and instructed

him in the simple hand movements that would prove necessary, they worked side by side in silence for a while.

Finally, Aescunnar came back to the subject of the young commander. “What is Riembau’s background? I have to admit, I’m curious. Besides, it doesn’t hurt to know more about her. The better I understand her motives, the sooner I might get on her good side.”

“You’re right. Louanne comes from the Jura mountains in France.”

“In other words, from the end of the world compared to the rest of the *Grande Nation*.”

“Your words.”

“Let me guess. She comes from a humble background and was drilled for performance from an early age. Only if you stick to the rules to the letter and always give one hundred percent will you achieve something in life, her parents told her. Right?”

“Right. You’re a good judge of human nature.”

“Too much honor. She literally has it tattooed on her forehead. If all people were so easy to read... How old is she?”

“Born in 2019. So twenty-seven.”

“I would have thought her to be in her mid-thirties.”

“Mars leaves its mark.”

“Apparently. By the way, I speak from my own experience. My father was a German diplomat; my mother is Armenian. We moved around a lot. In the diplomatic service, you’re usually transferred to a different place every three years. For children, this means that longer and thus deeper friendships can never develop, which often results in attachment anxiety. In addition, children tend to blame themselves for their lack of deeper friendships. I know all too well the nagging feeling of not being enough, not to have deserved the place where you stand. Riembau compensates for this by submitting to regulations with extra rigor.”

“And you, Aescunnar?”

He laughed. “I’ve bumped horns with various professors at different universities. One might accuse me of not being particularly adept at dealing with authority. I have a soft spot for dreamers and mavericks such as a certain Mr. Rhodan. The fact that I made it to Mars is mainly thanks to the support of his comrade-in-arms, Homer Gershwin Adams, who has also become famous.”

“Where does the unusual name Aescunnar come from, if I may ask? I couldn’t find it on any etymological web page. By the way, my first name Si Ping means ‘He who seeks peace.’“

“The name does you justice. Do you want to know the truth? I woke up one morning and suddenly knew my name was Cyr Aescunnar. And that cowboy hats suit me. Stupidly, they don’t fit under space helmets.”

“Maybe you should switch to headscarves.”

“A bandana? Yuck. I don’t believe in the myth of pirates. A predator is still a predator, whether on land or at sea. But do you know why so many of those unwashed fellows wore eye patches?”

“No?”

“The reason was by no means injuries in general. Some injuries would have happened in combat with sharp weapons and single-shot pistols, but not that often. But if you jump from the deck down into the hold after a boarding maneuver, you are at a disadvantage against the defenders lurking there because the pupils first have to adapt to the suddenly change in light. Unless you move the flap from one eye to the other during the jump and are immediately ready to take on your enemy. What do we learn from this, Si Ping the Peaceful?”

“It can be useful to spontaneously change one’s point of view?”

Aescunnar patted the geologist’s suit shoulder with his glove. “We’re going to have a lot of fun together, the two of us.”

Over the course of their not very strenuous but rather mindless activity, Aescunnar elicited more information from his supervisor about Bradbury Base and the conditions on the Red Planet.

The Mars mission, he learned, was plagued by material failure. In part because the equipment was not up to the harsh conditions, and also because there was human error in dealing with mixing Earth and Ferron technology. The colonists had committed a mortal sin of aerospace: they used new, untested technology instead of outdated but thousands of times proven technology.

Wei Si Ping did not lament this at all; on the contrary, he gave a prime example of purposeful optimism. Nevertheless, it was clear from his reports that Mars was lacking in all directions. For example, the yields of the dome garden fell short of projected values by a worrying factor. The safety margin of oxygen and food for the station was shrinking noticeably. If there was no improvement soon, one would not be able to avoid requesting the *Nesbitt-Breck* and evacuating Bradbury Base.

“We are certainly not giving up prematurely,” said the geologist. “Partial successes are emerging, although we have to fight for them until we drop. Everyone. Every single one of us.”

Aescunnar heard and understood the message. “You can count on me.”

Now Wei felt compelled to put his arm around his shoulders.

After the end of the shift, on the way back to the dubious safety of the sub-planetary container settlement, Aescunnar again steered the conversation to Hetcher.

Even Wei, who otherwise understood everything and everyone, was at a loss on this subject. “No one can even begin to guess what’s going on inside him. The Ferrons promised us an expert for terraforming. Instead, we got...Hetcher. Deaf, mute, closed in like a safe of ice.”

In his alleged field of expertise, the blue-skinned eccentric had

not yet achieved anything. He spent most of his time cruising the surface of Mars to maintain external installations.

“In principle, there’s nothing wrong with that. That, too, needs to be done, and as I said, Hetcher is reliable. But we were promised a highly qualified specialist, and in reality, they elegantly got rid of one, pardon my choice of word, cripple. Not even his fellow Ferrons seem to like him. Why else would they have left him alone at Bradbury Base?”

“Where did the other Ferrons go?”

Traveling through the deserts and craters of Mars, Wei explained. In addition to their missing commander and Hetcher, there were a total of forty-two Ferrons on the Red Planet. Seven expeditions, each composed of six people and an equal number of development workers from the Vega system, were currently moving across the endless, gloomy orange plains.

They used Mars mobiles, which were basically energy self-sufficient. The robust, extremely maneuverable vehicles were called “bubbles” because of the bubble-like shape, or “beetles,” because they were reminiscent of beetles with unfolded wings. The energy supply was provided by a Ferron fuel cell. During the day, hydrogen was obtained and stored from the captured solar energy by means of electrolysis, and the hydrogen was burned during the approximately twelve-hour Martian night.

Provided there was enough sunlight, the range of the vehicles was unlimited. Theoretically, Wei told him a pinched expression; but in practice, machinery inefficiencies led to gradually declining performance. In addition, the shade sails were extremely sensitive, and damage could be fatal for the crew. The record for a safely returned bubble expedition was thirty-three days.

“Wow,” said Aescunnar. He dreaded the idea of being locked up for weeks in his already grumpy protective suit. He was looking forward to taking off his outfit again, although he was viewing the coming hours together with Hetcher in the cramped cabin with mixed feelings.

“You didn’t act awkwardly,” Wei praised him as he bid farewell. “I am very confident that you will become a valuable member of our small colony. And thank you for the stimulating conversation.”

“It’s me who should be thanking you.”

The geologist noticed that Aescunnar took a deep breath at the door and gave himself a jolt before pressing down the handle. Quietly, he said, “Just between us, I’m convinced that Hetcher also has a good heart. But no one has found a way to get through to him yet...”

4.

The Light of the Stars

The siren wailed, and then came the pain.

Rhino had armed himself against this. After all, the phenomenon of transition shock had been given a lot of time and explanation in their training. Nevertheless, he felt as if his skull was being split with a glowing circular saw. He felt like he was being torn apart, starting from the top down along his spine. His cry died as abruptly as the torments turned into blackness.

Just as crudely, Rhino regained consciousness. He was lying on the bunk bed of his solo cabin, secured with belts as he had been advised, at least for the very first time.

“Ow,” he said aloud.

Nothing hurt anymore, but the shock still reverberated through him. So...that’s how it felt. Not necessarily an experience for which he would have paid admission.

He had been told that over time, there would be a certain habituation effect. Experienced astronauts no longer found the pain of equalization quite as tormenting as newcomers. However, this hardening was allegedly lost again if one did not participate in transition flights for a long time.

The jump range was limited by the energy a ship could muster. Larger ships therefore had an advantage over smaller ones, with the minimum size of Arkonide spherical ships equipped with transition engines being about fifty meters in diameter. However, the energy demand also increased sharply with size. The farther a jump, the longer it took a ship to get ready for the next. And the greater the distance overcome, the higher the rate of complications among the crew members.

According to Thora da Zoltral, the beautiful and unapproachable

Arkonide woman, all sorts of spacefaring yarn circulated in the Great Empire. About astronauts who were completely changed by a jump or who lost their minds; or about astronauts who disappeared without a trace in the fifth dimension after a transition. Horror stories that were better ignored.

It was certain, Thora had testified, that isolated deaths could occur as a side effect of transition jumps; for example, due to heart failure, if the transition shock intensified an initial disease. Of course, all those who took part in the long-distance flight of the *Tosoma* had been thoroughly checked in advance. Nevertheless, a medical complication rate of point-five percent of the crew had to be expected for jumps of below fifty light-years and up to three percent for jumps over the maximum distance of almost six hundred light years.

Rhino caught himself feeling over his arms and legs. *Hallelujah, everything's still there.* He unfastened the straps and swung himself down from the bed, groaning.

The Arkonides possessed drugs that relieved the pain of equalization. Unfortunately, they were not available to the Terran Arkon delegation. Thora's holdings had been stupidly destroyed along with the *Aetron*, the ship that had taken her and Crest to Mars.

A gong sounded through the ceiling speaker, then a familiar voice, as if the speaker were standing directly opposite him.

"This is Perry Rhodan speaking. I would like to give you the gratifying news that our dear *Tosoma* has successfully completed its first jump through hyperspace without incident. The first stage is over. We are thus almost six hundred light-years away from Earth, farther than any human before."

In the background, one could hear many cheers. Shouts of "bravo" and "hurrah" also rang out from the neighboring cabins.

Rhodan continued, "As you know, after a maximum transition, the ship needs twenty hours to regenerate. Numerous cultural offers will help to bridge this waiting time. You can find the dates in the

on-board information network. In particular, I would like to draw attention to the *Starlight Revue*, which starts tomorrow at five o'clock standard time in Hangar C. Celebrity chef Rinat Ugolyev will take care of our physical well-being at this event. Please arrive punctually. That's it for now."

Rhino grimaced. That "on time" had been an allusion to when and how he had come on board. By now, absolutely everyone knew the story. He would probably be teased about it for a long time. If he wanted to correct that flaw, he had to prove in the evening that he could do more than let himself be fished out by a tractor jet at the last second during takeoff. A big cauldron of borscht wouldn't be enough.

He had plenty of ideas for the Starlight Buffet. The only question was whether he could implement them with the resources available. Sixteen hours of preparation time sounded like a lot; however, it had to be taken into account that he and his staff needed a round of sleep in between. Otherwise, they couldn't get through the stress.

A normal circadian day-night rhythm was now out of the question anyway. The intervals between transitions already destroyed this. But the problem of sleep disorders despite taking melatonin supplements was not new to Rhino; he already knew it from his service on the *Svyatitel Nikolay*, a nuclear submarine of the Russian Navy. Its last trip had not been good...

Rhino suppressed the memories and got to work. The first step was to round up the kitchen brigade. There were other top chefs on the *Tosoma*. He knew two of them from joint television appearances.

Rhino called them via the cabin's radio and asked if they would support him as sous-chefs at the upcoming Starlight Buffet. Both agreed. The fact that he would return the favor at the next opportunity needed no special mention.

They met in the team canteen, which hardly differed from the dining room of an average comfort hotel. After the inevitable jokes about Rhino's special check-in process had been handled, Alistair MacAllister, a Scotsman under thirty years old who, despite his

youth, had already won numerous Michelin stars, and Gault-Millaut Toques, asked, “Why is the party taking place in a hangar of the lower outer ball shell?”

“Because there’s more space there. But above all, because the designer of the show had the grandiose idea of opening the hangar airlock so that only an almost invisible energy screen protects against the vacuum. This is meant to be thrilling, but above all, to offer a sensational, direct view into space. That’s why it’s called the *Starlight Revue*.“

“Typical theater director,” said Apeke Koulamoutou, a full-bodied middle-aged woman. “All that just for optical effects. Not the slightest consideration is given to the logistical problems of gastronomy. How many people are expected?”

“Participation is limited to six hundred. There’s a lot of interest; the tickets are as good as gone.”

“Six hundred! In a room without any infrastructure! I suppose you’ve already tried to explain to the director the disadvantages of this choice of location?”

“No way. He won’t listen.”

“What’s the guy’s name?” asked MacAllister.

“Kutschker. Austrian, as far as I know.”

“Franz Ferdinand Kutschker? Heavens, help us! You’ll have a lot of fun with him. I once collided with him head-on at the Fringe Festival in Edinburgh. A would-be genius of the worst kind. Narrow-minded, but blasé. I would have loved to deep-fry him.”

“He’s going to be annoying, but he’s not going to be the main problem,” Rhino reassured them. “There are no kitchens outside the ship where the hangars are located. Logically, they are located in the canteens.”

“That means either the waiters have to run their feet ragged in the hundreds of meters of connecting corridors between the innermost and outermost parts of the ship,” said Koulamoutou, “or

we deliver all the food before the audience arrives and warm it up. Which would mean a bitter loss of quality in some dishes."

"We can do it that way with the borscht and with some of the cold or lukewarm starters and desserts. The rest, we'll have to produce fresh on site."

"In the hangar itself?"

"That's right."

"Do we have a mobile canteen kitchen on board?"

"Not yet. But I'm confident that we can improvise a bit."

"For six hundred guests?"

"Where there's a will, there's a way..."

"You want what?" hissed Kutschker, a few hours later.

"To cook," Rhino replied dryly. "To do my job. That's what people expect of me."

"In front of everyone?" Exalted, the Austrian director flailed his spindly arms. "You and...how many team members?"

"Fifteen in all." Rhino controlled himself and acted as if he had taken no notice of the attack.

"Good man, could it be that you have either not read or not understood my comprehensive staging concept? The *Starlight Revue* offers a glimpse into space as well as the de facto already dawned future. That's why, as I've laid down on more than sixty pages, only robots will serve the guests."

"I don't care. I think that's nonsense, but if you want..."

"Art," cried Franz Ferdinand Kutschker in a firm voice, "demands it!"

“That’s good. Nevertheless, robots cannot cook, no matter how perfectly programmed they may be. Which, by the way, they are not; the vending machines of the Arkonide galleys do not provide much more than variously colored concentrate porridge, perfumed rather than seasoned.” Rhino had struggled with it long enough. The results obtained were similar to the dishes he had in mind, such as German coffee from cheap filter machines to carefully hand-infused Sandino Organico.

“Under no circumstances,” Kutschker said, “will I tolerate you and your kitchen servants beating up the entire production that has been designed and polished over countless weeks!”

Rhino resisted the impulse to permanently destroy the curly hairstyle of the bloated Austrian. Instead, he took two coffee cups from his duffel bag and removed the cover film. “Taste, please.”

“Why should I?”

“Because you, Mr. Director, make the choice of what your audience gets to eat. This is what the Arkonide robots will bring.” He held out his left cup to him. “And this is something similar to what I and my people cook. You may not care what the audience uses to satisfy their hunger or even taste. But let me tell you: the enjoyment of art goes through the stomach just like love.”

Reluctantly, Kutschker grabbed the dessert fork and took a tiny bite first from one, then from the other. After the second, his expression slipped into one of ecstasy. “That... That...is a world of difference,” he admitted.

“You have a keen sense of style,” said Rhino. “So, we all agree that we don’t want to argue about taste?”

The circumstances demanded the utmost from Rhino and his team. Supported by Apeke Koulamoutou and Alistair MacAllister, he had prepared his team as well as possible for the onslaught. However, things were by no means perfect. The improvised kitchen on one side wall of the spacious hangar proved to be only rudimentary.

As stubborn as the part-Earth-part-Arkonide equipment was, Rhino's staff also came from all over the world. They did not have enough time to establish a uniform menu. Therefore, they took advantage of their diversity: a different regional cuisine was offered at each of the five cooking islands.

MacAllister offered, not at all incongruous in view of the early morning hour, "variations of a full Scottish breakfast:" haggis in classic and vegetarian form; wafer-thin, fried slices of black, red, and white-black pudding; porridge with smoked fish; and of course, baked beans with bacon and fried eggs. It all looked very hearty, but the young Scotsman had mastered the art of preparing the well-known dishes in a new, sensationally airy and light way. In the meantime, a queue had formed in front of his counter, which was almost longer than the one in front of Rhino's stand.

Apeke also celebrated the culinary tradition of her homeland. Typical for the cuisine of the Central African state of Gabon were fufu, a porridge made from mashed plantains, and gari, a porridge made from cassava flour. Various stews were served, with or without meat, but always with a variety of tropical fruits and vegetables. Of course, there was also the national dish Nyembwe: chicken in a sauce made of oil and fruit from the palm oil tree.

For those with a sweet tooth, Rhino had called up the pâtissière Dritëra Zeqiri, a native Albanian. She served colorful llokume, sticky bites of stocked syrup flavored with orange blossom or rose water, rolled in sugar and chopped nuts. In addition, she had baked dumplings called Sheqerpare, literally translated to "sugar money;" Eklera, glazed brandy pastries filled with coffee, cocoa, or vanilla cream, which in Germany was also called "Liebesknochen" or "Hasenpfote;" Kadaif, "angel hair;" a dessert made of thin threads of

dough reminiscent of glass noodles; and sultjash, rice pudding with various sweet sauces, red groats, and apple or apricot puree.

The fourth food counter was occupied by Noritoshi Takase and two other Japanese sushi chefs. The nigiri sushi they prepared was traditionally eaten by hand, which is why it was particularly suitable for a buffet. As in higher-end restaurants, every single piece of sushi had already been seasoned by the chef, depending on the type of fish, with soy sauce and wasabi. Although Takase had been enthusiastic about the conservation possibilities of the Arkonides, he was nevertheless happy to be able to offer the bulk of the fresh fish he had brought with him on the first day.

Rhino himself relied on his miracle weapon: borscht, which had been simmering for twelve hours. He served freshly baked bread, sour cream, and a garlic-oil dip, as well as a selection of cold and lukewarm appetizers, so-called sakuski—Olivier salad with hard-boiled eggs, crayfish, veal tongue, capers, carrots, peas, pickles, and plenty of homemade mayonnaise—herring; blintzes, pierogi, and baranki filled with various things, accompanied by tea from a traditional samovar and varenye jam.

The buffet was very well received by the audience. Rhino and his comrades-in-arms were showered with compliments. A few glitches were inevitable, but at the end of the day, everyone was satisfied.

Rhino didn't notice much about the *Starlight Revue* other than that there were variety performances of varying levels and degrees of difficulty. The individual contributions were inserted into a framework plot that tried to somehow reconcile medieval stargazers, scantily clad fairies, futuristic cyborg creatures, and all sorts of fictitious aliens.

As a total work of art, however, the event eclipsed almost everything Rhino had ever experienced, including some legendary performances at the Bolshoy Theater. The hall as a whole, the catering area, and the stage were extremely skillfully illuminated: atmospheric, with varied, original lighting and at the same time discreet enough that the main attraction—namely the huge, seemingly open airlock and the twinkling stars in the endless blackness of space—remained in the foreground.

When the battle at the buffet was more or less over and the last performance was being carried out, Rhino moved to a corner of the hangar, where he had wisely had an additional extractor installed, and lit a cigarette. He was righteously exhausted but convinced that he had compensated for his original tardiness to some extent. They would continue to tease him about the tractor beam incident but would now also mention the successful Starlight Buffet.

Mission accomplished.

The cigarette tasted...strange. Rhino eyed it suspiciously, smelling it, even on his fingers, although he had just washed his hands thoroughly. No, it wasn't because of that, nor was it because of the tobacco or the paper he had used to roll it. The strange, metallic smell seemed to come from the wall. But there was nothing, no outlet of any kind, only smooth, lukewarm metal.

Rhino squeezed out the cigarette, even though he had only smoked half of it, and went in search of Kutschker.

The Austrian was sitting diagonally to the side of the stage at the control room. Only the third attempt to get his attention was successful. He didn't want to hear about Rhino's observation.

"Stop bothering me with such things!"

"It's probably harmless," Rhino admitted. "Nevertheless, I think you should inform the ship's command."

"Are you right in the head, man? My revue is heading for its final climax. The big encore, the closing number, is about to begin. It has to be finished before the next hyperspace, which will take place in exactly eleven minutes. Any delay would be fatal."

"Kutschker, I have accommodated you as much as possible. My people and I have put on stupid, impractical costumes, we have decorated our tables lavishly with star-shaped carvings, despite its distastefulness. Now show insight and pass on my report to the main control center."

“I’ll do no such thing!” hissed Kutschker. “I won’t make a mockery of myself by reporting some phantom smells. Now don’t bother me anymore; my full attention is needed for the next, extremely complicated technical assignment.” He leaned over the director’s desk, clearly signaling that he would ignore any further response.

Boiling inside, Rhino went back to the smoking corner. The smell had not become stronger, rather, it was weaker. Should he ignore the Austrian’s disgust and notify the ship’s command himself? But it was true that they certainly had other concerns shortly before the second transition. The fact that Rhino had gained a certain fame from his late arrival didn’t help either. Moreover, he would probably have to work with Kutschker again in the future, so he didn’t want to sour things with the director by ignoring instructions.

Tired, he leaned against the cool wall. No, he would keep quiet. Contrary to his usual habit, this time, he would not make himself important beyond his area of expertise. He had more or less done his job, quite brilliantly; at the end of the event, after the transition jump, not much could go wrong. Franz Ferdinand Kutschker was responsible for everything that was not directly related to gastronomy. He was as much a fool as any Rhino had ever seen, but he seemed to know what he was doing in his field of expertise.

Rhino smoked another cigarette, this time entirely, then plopped down onto an armchair and waited for the siren and the equalization pain.

Around the same time, hundreds of meters farther inside the ship, Thora was supervising the countdown to the next transition. Holographic controls, which adapted dynamically in real time, surrounded and enveloped her in her own virtual world, so that she perceived the headquarters of the *Tosoma* only as a background for her holographic projections.

One of the holos showed the *Starlight Revue* running in hangar C. Thora admitted to herself that she was fascinated by it. The event showed her once again how different humans and Arkonides were.

It was unbelievable what effort these people put into such things, just to give artistic and culinary delights to others, most of whom they neither knew personally nor needed to win over!

Even more than the variety and exuberant imagination of the performances, the commander was impressed that this revue was staged at all. Very few of her own people would have thought of tearing themselves away from their fictional plays to watch a theatrical performance, not to mention they would never put themselves on a stage. Acting was regarded as an inferior activity, as was food preparation, which is why one was avoided and the other left to robots.

Thora forced herself to focus on the numerous messages that were automatically arriving from all parts of the ship. A transition was a highly complex process. The structure field converters had to be precisely adjusted. Of course, the vast majority of corrections were made by various positronics, but there remained a margin that machines could not manage. That was Thora's task, and it weighed heavily on her.

As an experienced astronaut, she knew better than anyone else on board what an immense risk they took in embarking on a long-haul flight with a ten-thousand-year-old ship salvaged as half a wreck from the seabed. A vessel that did not have a single auxiliary craft! Thorah hadn't been particularly eager to partake in the flight, but...

"Everything all right?" Crest interrupted her thoughts, as if he had read them. Thora's foster father, the man who was more important to her than her own life—the man for whom she took this flight.

She pushed some holos aside to see his face. As nearly always, he radiated kindness, humility and wisdom, but recently also a thirst for action that almost frightened her.

"Yes, of course." She tried to hide her feelings from him, realized that she would fail, and added, "The *Tosoma's* generators are working fine. There's no reason to stop the countdown."

“Still, you don’t sound very confident.” Although Crest had adopted and raised her, and they had mastered numerous critical situations together, not least in the Terran solar system, they still relied on formal speech to communicate with each other. Arkonides were terribly stiff compared to the barbarians of Larsaf III. “Are you plagued by dark premonitions?”

“No. I trust our technology and my astronautical capabilities. We knew in advance the risk we were taking and deemed it appropriate. It’s just…”

“Yes?” he encouraged her. “Pour out your heart to me, dearest Thora. You know that I don’t judge anything we discuss.”

“For which I will be grateful to you for all eternity. You know, for the longest time, I wanted nothing more than to get away from these savages and back to the civilization of the Great Empire. But now that the time has come, I feel…melancholy. It’s almost as if I miss Terra and humanity already.”

“It’s not goodbye forever.”

“Who knows? On the other hand, my excitement for rejoining the Great Empire is limited. What reception awaits us on Arkon? The Regent will not be pleased that we are still alive. Who would have thought it possible that you in particular would return home, healthier and more vital than ever?”

“We did not seek the biological immortality you allude to for self-interest.”

“Of course not. I would never accuse you of that. Of course, I dare not predict how Arkon will feel about this.”

“I have accepted the gift of eternal life,” Crest said slowly and insistently, “to serve a greater cause. To save Arkon, we strive for nothing less. And we will succeed, I am firmly convinced of it! As soon as we get close to Arkon, we will contact Charron da Gonozal. He will tell us… What is it?”

During the conversation, Thora had continued to follow the constantly updating status reports. She had noticed a tiny irregularity in the columns of numbers but, despite investigating, had not been able to track down the cause.

In any case, it was a negligible trifle; otherwise, the multiple redundant monitoring routines of the transition engine would have addressed it and issued warning messages.

"Nothing. I'm overstimulated and fidgety, that's all."

"Thora. We are on the right track and in the process of making history. Arkon needs us, both of us, and maybe Perry Rhodan. We must not hesitate."

"You're right, as always."

Slowly but surely, the planned transition was coming ever closer; in a few seconds, the *Tosoma* would start its second transition jump. But the slight, inexplicable deviation from the norm did not leave Thora's mind. A feeling told her that she should interrupt the countdown to be on the safe side. But there was Crest, standing high in front of her, and his urgent appeal: *We must not hesitate.*

Thora da Zoltral did not intervene in the programmed process. She let it happen.

The siren sounded and the *Tosoma* jumped.

5.

Let's Play Hide and Seek

In the torture chamber, Cyr Aescunnar met Celia Cienfuegos. Bradbury Base's gym was a long hose composed of three of the usual container modules. It held a number of devices specifically designed to counteract muscle waste caused by the low Martian gravity. The torture, Wei Si Ping had explained, was not so much physical exertion, but rather the fact that the ward doctor, a New Zealander named Emily Tempsky, took medical measurements on the trainees almost nonstop. Stress ECG, the monitoring of lactate levels, and more, were generally accepted as necessary precautions. No one objected, but it was still annoying.

"What happened to you?" Aescunnar asked the Cuban biologist, who was doing leg presses on a machine, even though her left arm was stuck in a noose and her head was decorated with a turban-like bandage.

"Small accident while stowing the supplies from the *Schiaparelli*. In the storeroom, a pile of boxes toppled over, hit me, and taught me the painful lesson that there's a crucial difference between weight and mass."

"How could that happen?"

"I don't know. Our colleagues favor the hypothesis that the forklift malfunctioned."

"Strange."

"Yes; at the moment, this station seems to be bewitched. Or to put it more scientifically, it's exemplary proof of Murphy's Law."

"Everything that can go wrong, will go wrong. But you bear it with humor."

"What other option do I have? *Ay que resolver.* "

Aescunnar laughed. He didn't speak Spanish very well, but he knew that Cuban expression. The analogous translation was: you just have to cope with it. Celia's compatriots from the largest Caribbean island had been world champions of improvisation under adverse circumstances marked by resource scarcity for many decades. Maybe that's what made her a particularly good fit for Mars.

"*Siempre luchando*," he replied, always fighting. "Does it hurt badly?"

"It's okay. A few bumps and bruises, and my shoulder was dislocated. But Doctor Tempsky quickly fixed me up." She nodded to the doctor.

"Luckily, I was nearby." Tempsky, a tall, busty, somewhat plump blonde in her forties, wearing a stained, scuffed, originally lime-green work coat, got up from her desk, walked over to them, and then turned to Aescunnar. "This is your first time in my torture chamber. You're the historian, aren't you?"

He answered in the affirmative, adding sarcastically, "Unfortunately, not the hydrologist." He preferred to say for himself what most of his fellow humans thought of him anyway.

"I'm like the others. Forgive my fatalism, but in my opinion, only a wizard could help us in the long run. Or an angel. Unfortunately, none have been spotted yet. Come, you can go for a ride."

The ward doctor led him to a kind of exercise bike and, after he had freed his upper body, she put the electrodes for ergometry on him.

"I'm going to prick your earlobe every two minutes to draw blood. According to your personnel file, you are in good shape for your age, but I prefer to see for myself."

While he was pedaling and the resistance was still bearable, he talked to Tempsky about New Zealand, which he had visited several times to search the traditions of the Maori for traces of pre-astronautic contacts—unsuccessfully. The name of the Maori's

mythical country of origin, Avaiki, also stood for the underworld of their legends, but he had not been able to find any evidence of sub-planetary alien remains.

Emily was from the South Island, from Oamaru in the district of Otago. At the end of the nineteenth century, the doctor recounted, her hometown had been an important trading and fishing port, one of the most beautiful and financially strongest cities in Australasia and about the same size as Los Angeles at the time.

“During my childhood, there was no sign of it. After the closure of the port and the decline of the industry, the region fell into a deep slumber, from which it was only awakened with a kiss by Prince Tourism. Not to our advantage, in my opinion. Since then, my people have been chasing after the crumbs that fall out of Queenstown for us.”

That sounded bitter. “You don’t like bungee jumping, paragliding, jet boating, and other adrenaline-inducing activities?” the historian asked, breathlessly. His sweat had long been flowing in streams.

“I have nothing against extreme sports. As far as I care, everyone should harm themselves as they please, as long as they spare others. But those brightly dressed children who flock from all over the world to the New Zealand Alps for the thrill, don’t show the slightest consideration for the environment or inhabitants. These rowdy, loud show-offs can stay far away, as far as I’m concerned. Queenstown has been an open-air pleasure house for decades anyway, and Oamaru is not far away. If you wanted to know why I let myself be persuaded to join this half-cocked Martian adventure, you now have an answer. Anyway, that’s enough for today. We’ll finish before you fall off the saddle. Cool down for three minutes, then you can dismount.”

Aescunnar only managed a relieved gasp. Out of breath, he couldn’t have responded in words to Tempsky’s fierce tirade.

Her favorite place was green on three sides and red on the fourth. Rarely enough did Louanne Riembau have the opportunity

to retreat to this place. The spot in the garden under the dome, at the very edge, directly along the transparent wall, otherwise surrounded by dense leafy plants and protected from view, reminded her of the secret hiding place of her childhood. Outside the settlement at Saint-Claude, on the Swiss border, she had spent many afternoons hiding in a similar refuge from her well-meaning but sometimes overly demanding parents. That's probably why she loved the hard-to-reach spot so much.

Here, it even smelled similarly musty. Added to that was the view of the constantly fascinating, unbroken Martian landscape.

At the moment, however, she hardly had eyes for it. She was completely focused on her tablet. Again and again, she combed through the numerous images available in the archive of a certain area of the planet's surface. The Tharsis Montes, three mighty shield volcanoes whose dimensions dwarfed everything that good old Earth had to offer. Louanne kept running new filters over them, always choosing different camera angles in the hope of finally discovering what she had previously overlooked.

Before she could achieve a positive result, she was startled by a rustle in the bushes. She twirled around, recognized the intruder, and relaxed again. Wei Si Ping, her good-natured right hand, slipped into her hiding spot. Only he knew about it, and he was the only person, or Ferron, for that matter, that she would tolerate there.

"What is it?" she asked, a little more confused than she had intended to sound.

"The sheriff has completed his investigation into the storehouse incident."

Idris al-Sharif was the security chief at Bradbury Base. The base's veteran crew often argued heartily about who had given him the obvious nickname.

"And?"

"As we suspected. The crates were not sufficiently secured, and a

brake cable had loosened on the forklift. Material fatigue and human sloppiness, as usual."

"As usual." She wiped her eyes.

Did it never stop? Did the crew not take her repeated warnings seriously? Was it because her authority as commander had yet to be officialized? Louanne still felt that she had to fight hourly for the recognition of her subordinates.

"Do you know who's responsible?"

Her confidant shrugged. "It's impossible to hold a single person accountable for this. The mistake may have happened today or weeks ago. Just about everyone was in the storage room at some point."

He was right, of course. They took turns handling the countless maintenance tasks.

"There are just too few of us," Wei added apologetically. "And we're permanently overwhelmed. We were lucky no more damage was caused. At least none of the devices broke. It could have been worse."

"May God protect me from all that is considered luck," Louanne quoted her grandmother. "Anything else?"

"Hetcher and his roommate, Aescunnar, the historian..."

"Just who we needed."

"You're wrong about him, and you know that, Commander," Wei reprimanded her mildly. "He's trying hard. He can do nothing about the fact that Professor Jennings contracted food poisoning shortly before the *Schiarapelli's* departure. He's trying his best to make up for his lack of qualifications with increased commitment and is certainly not too proud to do grunt work."

"As if we didn't already have that kind of person. He and Hetcher...what did you want to tell me?"

“Apparently, the two have recently clashed. Judging by their facial expressions, there is considerable tension between them.”

“And I’m sure Hetcher is looking for me so he can complain about his colleague?”

She alluded to the fact that experience had shown that Hetcher could not stand living with anyone, just as no one got along with him in the long run. That’s why the Ferron was mostly on his own.

Against regulations.

But what could she do? Tie or lock him up in a junk room? They needed every man, and Hetcher meticulously handled his maintenance services.

Wei answered her question in the negative. “They don’t exactly act like lovebirds, but he seems to tolerate Aescunnar’s presence, for whatever reason.”

“Wonderful. Is that all you’re bothering me about?”

“No.” He pressed on. “I... I’m worried about you. You’re thinking about Nguyen again, aren’t you? You shouldn’t. Because it’s pointless. He’s not coming back. Nguyen is dead.”

Louanne felt called out. In fact, she had once again pondered the whereabouts of the old, extremely popular commander. Nineteen days ago, he had disappeared with his Ferron companion during their advance into a previously unexplored region of Mars. Gone without a trace, which was impossible. Even in the event of a total failure of their Mars mobile, the black box would still have had to transmit its location. And there should have been traces to be found. The Red Planet was orbited by several satellites. They did not miss the slightest change on the surface. It was said, and it seemed, that the mobile with Nguyen and the leader of the Ferrons had been swallowed by Mars.

A thought occurred to her that she didn’t like yet still said half-aloud. “Could Hetcher have something to do with the matter?”

“What? You mean...”

“He’s out and about more often than anyone else, almost always alone. He was close to Nguyen, like all of us, but who knows what’s going on inside the guy?”

“With all due respect, that’s absurd,” Wei said more sharply than she was used to hearing from him. “Commander, you’re looking for a scapegoat because you don’t want to believe what happened. Yes, Hetcher may behave strangely. But let’s face it, the truth is that we’re dealing with a pitiful, disabled person.”

“Or with an exceptionally gifted actor. In any case, we certainly haven’t had fewer accidents since he came to the base.”

“For centuries, most births in Central Europe have been statistically recorded around the time of year when storks nest. Nevertheless, the storks do not bring the children. In addition, Hetcher was proven to be three hundred kilometers from the commander’s last known location. The log files of his Mars mobile prove it, as do the satellite images.”

“I know all that. Also the one about the storks, by the way.” Inwardly furious, Louanne ran her hand over the surface of the tablet and deleted the record of her recent fruitless efforts. “I ask for your understanding of my desperation and forgiveness for the unjustified accusations made,” she said formally. “And thank you, Si Ping, for clearing my head once again.”

“Nothing to thank me for.”

She let out a humorless laugh. “That’s exactly what it is, isn’t it? Nothing. The station is going down the drain, and we know a thousand small reasons for it, but not the actual cause. Unless we’re being punished for our folly in believing that humanity has a right to colonize Mars. But this,” she seized her closest and only confidant by the forearm, “I will refuse to accept until my last breath.”

“There are already two of us.”

“I know what I have in you, friend. Let’s go. Routine is calling. I’m the new commander. I have to let the dead rest and take care of

the living. Anything else would be irresponsible."

Secretly, Riembau was aware that she was lying. Something inside her sensed that the sensitive, always conscientious Nguyen was still alive. And that Hetcher had a secret far more serious than her own hiding place in the green dome.

Aescunnar fixed a tablet into the holder and placed it in the middle of the table of their shared, oppressively narrow cabin.

"Look," he said, knowing full well that Hetcher could not hear him.

But the Ferron could see...and read. For example, the words that flashed in large letters on the screen of the tablet: *LOOK HERE.*

Still, Hetcher acted as if he hadn't noticed the message or his roommate's commitment. As if petrified, he sat on his bed and stared into the void, a statue of apathy.

"You've made me understand that you feel bothered by my advances of friendship," Aescunnar continued, undaunted. With a barely noticeable delay, the tablet's speech recognition software converted what he said into writing. "Or how else am I supposed to interpret you giving me the cold shoulder?"

No reaction.

"On the other hand, my friend, it was you who started writing. Two periods of sleep ago, remember?"

No reaction.

"You used pen and paper—admittedly, a cumbersome method. With the tablet, it would be much easier. I'm talking, you're reading. Then type an answer, even in Ferron, if you like. Yes, I was able to get hold of a translation program in the station's collection. Not as sophisticated as the prototypes of the nano-translators injected into the crew of the *Tosoma*, but for the two of us, it will be enough. I'll hear your answer in English right after. Or alternatively in German, Armenian, French, Spanish, Arabic, Urdu, or Mandarin.

Assuming some goodwill, we could have the most amazing debates this way."

No reaction.

Aescunnar took the tablet, carried it to Hetcher, held it in front of his face, and dropped it. A few centimeters above the carpet of the cabin, the Ferron caught the flat device. He stared up at the human, unmistakably angry.

"Tricked you," said Aescunnar. "I would have bet a lot of money that you couldn't bear to let the thing break. Waste is repugnant to you, isn't it? Now read."

Hetcher lowered his deep-set eyes to the screen. His golden brown pupils moved back and forth. He read. Then he returned the tablet.

"First step accomplished," said Aescunnar, after accepting it back. "So we've ticked that off. Basically: me Tarzan, you Jane. Oh. No, delete that remark immediately, it would lead to too many unnecessary explanations. New attempt." He cleared his throat. "Now it's your turn, Hetcher. I hereby solemnly place my communication offer on your pillow. Use it whenever you feel ready."

Aescunnardid just that and then squeezed himself into the tiny hygiene cell to clean himself with the washcloth and brush his teeth. Apart from the noises he himself caused, he heard nothing. In the need to drown out the silence in the cabin, he even gargled extra loudly.

Afterwards, he undressed, neatly folded his overalls and underwear, and put on the silk nightgown he had brought from Earth. There had to be a touch of style, even on Mars.

Throwing himself onto his bunk bed, he covered himself and buried his head in the hard, ridiculously thin cushion.

From the other side of the room, a synthetic voice came from the tablet speaker: "Sleep well, Cyr Aescunnar."

6.

The Catastrophe

Perry Rhodan woke up in hell.

He would have liked to have believed it a nightmare, but such torments could not be dreamed of. The equalization shock, more cruel and paralyzing than ever, went straight into pain, as if a horde of devils were beating him with iron bars, incessantly, from all sides. He didn't know which way was up or down. Biting, oily, foul smoke robbed him of his vision and breath. Tongues of fire broke through the darkness and flashing shadows like the grimaces of demons.

He heard people screaming, including himself, and tasted blood in his mouth. The temptation was great to bow to the realization that all this chaos was too much for a weak person and consequently surrender to the alluring sense of powerlessness. Nevertheless, he fought against it, partly out of sheer defiance, partly because he sensed that his fate and that of his expedition were on a knife's edge. He had to save what he could.

First and foremost, he needed to regain his bearings. Shaking off the confusion was not easy. His body was constantly being buffeted. Shocks like an earthquake shook him and his surroundings. They came in rapid succession like the beat of a drum. The whole room vibrated with pounding and roaring. Rhodan realized that artificial gravity started and resumed within fractions of a second, with very different vectors and values, often with multiple times Earth's gravity. How was he supposed to get onto his feet, let alone to the command desk?

Other systems also seemed to be malfunctioning. The demon shadows turned out to be repeatedly failed attempts by holo projectors to build screens with data and schematic representations. An overdriven computer voice mixed into the roar and siren howl.

"Highest alert," it squawked in Arkonide. "Transition failed. The

integrity of the ship is at risk."

Well, Rhodan had already figured that much out on his own.

"It is recommended to evacuate the crew by means of the auxiliary craft."

"Idiots! We don't have any auxiliary craft!" came Reginald Bull's unmistakable voice. He crawled out of the smoke towards Rhodan. "Are you hurt?"

Good question. "I don't think so."

"Likewise. But I feel more put through the wringer than after the hardest astronaut training."

Matte orange emergency lighting flared up, revealing the destruction on the bridge. Crew members rolled around everywhere, some foaming at the mouth, some with impossibly twisted limbs.

Rhodan saw that for Zhao Linpeng, a tracking specialist, any help would come too late; a double-hand-wide, razor-sharp metal splinter protruded from his chest. He looked silently at them, questioningly, with an expression of astonishment. Their journey to Arkon had claimed its first victim. It was easily assumed that Zhao was not the only one.

"No time for remorse," growled Bull, whose thoughts had followed a similar path.

Side by side, they dragged themselves towards the command post. Lights and holos flickered. Some consoles had exploded; fires had broken out in several places. Sprinkler systems began their operation.

The announcement, which had been repeated several times, changed. "Emergency generators started. Self-repair initiated. Overall condition critical. Alert level remains in place. Evacuation still recommended. Orders requested."

Sudden weightlessness allowed the pair to repel each other and

hover flat above the ground to overcome the distance to the commander's seat. The fact that, as old-school astronauts, they had learned extensively how to deal with weightlessness and pressure was now to their advantage.

The two Arkonides at the command station straightened up, but while Thora clung to the console, Crest drifted upward towards a cloud of sharp, red-hot debris ejected by a charred crater in the wall. His cloak had tangled around his head, so he rowed helplessly with his arms, unaware of the danger he was in.

Without hesitation, Rhodan calculated the angle, took some quick, sideways trippy steps, and then rushed up to the Arkonide. He caught him at the last moment. The impact changed their trajectory, not quite as desired, but at least they didn't collide with the debris cloud.

With one arm clutching Crest, Rhodan grabbed the suspension device of a ceiling lamp with the other. His fingers had barely found support when gravity took hold once more, abruptly and far too excessively.

The pain was murderous. Rhino thought he had to die— no, *wanted* to die. As long as the pain stopped.

It seemed to take an eternity before the equalization shock gradually subsided and he consciously perceived his environment again. He was presented with a terrible image. The improvised ballroom had become a battlefield.

The grand finale, the first encore of the *Starlight Revue*, had ended according to plan in time for the artists to sit down at the edge of the stage and, along with the audience, count down the seconds until the transition. Not a bad directorial idea, Rhino had credited Kutschker. After the transition jump, which thus became an integral highlight of the show, the second and last encore should have ended the performance harmoniously.

There could no longer be any question of that. As if a bomb had hit the rising rows of seats in the grandstand, crooked bodies rolled

everywhere. Others were unconscious, perhaps dead.

The sound system emitted screeching noises like an acoustic feedback loop. Flickering lights added to the impression of an inferno. The lighting had largely failed, but there were two strong sources: the formerly invisible energy screen in front of the open hangar bulkhead, which now shimmered in all the colors of the rainbow and pulsed rhythmically. It was reminiscent of a giant soap bubble that inflated and shrank and swelled again until it almost threatened to burst.

Rhino felt cold running down his spine. Their only protection from the deadly vacuum of space was anything but stable. The second source of illumination was the director's desk, from which lights flashed and meter-high fountains of sparks flew. A man was slumped in the seat in front of it. Kutschker! His clothes caught fire.

Rhino staggered towards him, repeatedly brought to his knees by jerky gravitational fluctuations. He tore the limp body away from the source of the fire and rolled the man over, smothering the flames, not without minor burns to his own neck and arms. A small price to pay to save a genius from his fiery death...

The artificial gravity stopped three or four times in a row. Rhino was unable to do more than try to keep track of things. As far as he could see, no one was in imminent mortal danger; however, he couldn't see very far. The pulsating of the protective force field slowed down and lost intensity. Rhino fervently hoped that this would lead to stabilization. Lightning no longer flew out from the burnt-out director's desk; instead, only a few sparks flashed sporadically.

Suddenly, the screeching over the sound system stopped. The last lighting fixtures went out. In the cold light of the stars, the darkness masked nearly everything. The moans from hundreds of injured bodies suddenly sounded hair-raisingly loud.

Somehow, Rhodan managed to hold on for a few seconds despite

the extra weight. As soon as he felt that he was becoming significantly lighter, he let go and slowly floated to the ground with Crest. They cushioned the landing relatively effortlessly.

"You have probably just saved the life of an immortal," said the Arkonide. "Thank you."

"Who knows how quickly you'll be able to reciprocate..."

With Bull's support, Thora succeeded in making some of the holographic control surfaces usable. She retrieved status messages, then ordered med robots to the bridge. The small machines arrived shortly afterwards and began administering first aid to the crew.

Calmly and confidently, Thora made decisions about what repairs to prioritize. "It doesn't look quite as bad as I feared," she said after artificial gravity had settled so far that it fluctuated barely noticeably around normal levels. "The *Tosoma* is a tough old girl. Mistransitions have torn apart ships much grander than her."

"Mistransition? Is there a reason for this?"

"That can wait. Other things are higher priority for the time being, such as the readjustment of life support systems. And damage control. There have been explosions in other places as well."

"Such sophisticated technology," Bull muttered, "and then rows of instruments pop and burn out just because you've taken a wrong turn."

Thora began to reply but then changed her mind. She had learned to deal with his flippant manner.

It took some getting used to, though, Rhodan thought.

The more astronauts reported ready for duty and got their mission stations up and running, the more complete their picture of the spherical spacecraft's condition. The resulting fires could be localized and were already partially extinguished. Neither the transition engine nor other important engines had suffered irreparable damage. But it was bad enough that there were fatalities.

“Otherwise, we seem to have escaped with a black eye.” Thora concluded her interim report calmly. “The inner spherical shells are secured. As for the outermost...” She faltered and froze.

“Hangar C,” said Bull tonelessly, squinting over her shoulder. “Oh, no!”

Before panic could break out, Rhino took a deep breath and shouted as loudly as he could into the darkness, “Keep calm! We have a power outage. The protective shield is not affected; it is powered externally.”

The last comment was pure conjecture, but it had to be true; otherwise, they would have already been sucked into open space with the last of the air. “Stay level-headed,” he continued. “My people and I will organize emergency lights.”

No one complained that Rhino was taking the initiative and de facto command. He was not surprised. If he owed anything to his military past in the Russian Navy, it was the understanding of when natural authority was needed. It had already paid off in many a canteen.

With the help of his lighter, which he had set to maximum flame, he found his way to the buffet area. There, he gathered his kitchen staff around him, at least those who were well. As he learned, some had sustained injuries of undetermined degrees, including his sous chef, Alistair MacAllister, who was not doing well at all. Rhino would soon have to address the issue of medical assistance. But first it was necessary to rekindle the crew’s survival instincts.

He instructed his people to ignite the burners on the buffer, which had been extinguished before the transition for safety reasons. Placed on the presentation stands of the tables, they provided only sparse light, but at least light and thus hope.

Time for the next step.

“Listen to me!” cried Rhino in a commanding tone. “The most important thing is that we keep a clear head. We will leave the

hangar, but in an orderly manner, and not trample each other to death. The first one who starts running gets to deal with me. I'll never cook them so much as an egg again, understand?"

He received murmured approval. But then someone shouted, "The airlocks are closed! They won't budge!"

"Wait, I'm coming."

In fact, the heavy steel airlocks leading into the interior of the ship were shut. Rhino searched and found a communication surface, sunk into the frame. He laid his flat hand on it and demanded contact with the ship's bridge.

A voice, too flawless and diligent to be of natural origin, replied with perfect melody, "This is not possible under the circumstances."

"Why not?"

"The connection is broken."

"Then give me the ship's positronics."

"This is not possible under the circumstances."

"Who are you?"

"The local node computer for hangar area C."

"And you're not attached to the network?"

"The connection is broken."

"I see. But you control the entrances to the ship's interior?"

"Yes."

"Good. Please open it."

"This is not possible under the circumstances."

Rhino suppressed the curse on his tongue. "Why not? We have an emergency."

“According to the crisis regulations of the Arkonide fleet, unstable external sectors must be completely sealed off until the all-clear has been given.”

Unstable? Rhino looked around furtively. Some of the bystanders whispered. “I don’t want this to make the rounds,” he hissed at them. “In all that is sacred to you, restrain yourselves. If there’s one thing we don’t need, it’s confusion and desperation. Have I made myself clear?”

“What are you going to do?” asked a young woman who bore a distant resemblance to Renate, Rhino’s fling on New Year’s Eve.

“Don’t worry; we’ll be fine.” Into the microphone of the intercom, he said quietly but emphatically, “Computer, at least close the large hangar lock in case the energy screen collapses.”

“This is not possible under the circumstances.”

The response was hair-raising. “Why?”

“I don’t have access. The connection is broken.”

Rhino slowly counted to ten. He had to remain a role model—under no circumstances could he lose his nerve. “But that also means you can’t stop us from trying it manually. Right?”

“Right.”

“Just for the sake of completeness, this sector doesn’t have its own emergency generator, does it?”

“Wrong. But the connection is broken.”

“Oh well. This one too.” Rhino took his finger off the talk button and turned to the people who had lined up in front of the bulkhead. “You heard it. We’re dependent on ourselves for the time being and will make the best of it. Firstly, we are setting up a military hospital right next to the catering area. Out of six hundred people, at least some must have medical training. Secondly, skilled craftsmen should make torches or oil lamps with the leftovers from the fryers so that we are no longer in the dark. Third, the technicians among

us will meet at the outer bulkhead and try to get the locking mechanism working. Spread the message, but calmly and civilly. I am convinced that we only have to hold out here for a little while, then we will be rescued." He took a deep breath.

"And if not?" someone murmured.

Rhino did not bother with an answer.

7.

Twilight Zone

Although a day on Mars lasted almost forty minutes longer than on Terra, Bradbury Base remained faithful to Earth's calendar. In the long run, they would have been completely confused anyway, since the Martian year covered 687 days.

As was customary in many countries around the world, the workflow was divided into three shifts: eight hours of general maintenance service, eight hours of rest, eight hours of research in the crew's respective departments. If no special regulations came into play, the shift changes took place at six, fourteen, and twenty-two hundred hours standard time.

The container settlement reminded Aescunnar a little of the cabins he had encountered in the French Maritime Alps, in a very positive way. Despite all the seclusion and crampedness, there was a certain savoir-vivre. From the outside, the refuges didn't look like much. They resembled low, crooked, weathered scales. Inside, however, one encountered undreamt-of luxury. Rarely was the dinner together less than five courses, and the wine served with it was excellent.

"There is also very special liquor in the French Maritime Alps," Aescunnar enthused as he handed Celia the salad bowl. "It is called *Génépi* and is distilled from the plant of the same name, an Artemisia species, and is so strong that you don't drink it, but drizzle it on a sugar cube. If you put it on your tongue, you'd think it would burn right through."

The Cuban laughed. "That sounds even worse than our *Aguadiente*, and that's quite ruthless. I think it's probably a relative of wormwood and absinthe, Artemisia glacialis, which is found in high-altitude Alpine regions. What brought you there?"

"At the foot of the Grand Capelet, which is only a few meters away from the Three-Thousander, lies the Vallée des Merveilles,

which means Valley of Wonders. This refers to around one hundred thousand rock engravings from the Bronze Age. In order to make them, prehistoric people climbed countless times to about two and a half thousand meters above sea level. Amazing, isn't it?"

"What do the drawings represent?"

"As always, when they can't think of anything better, anthropologists say fertility symbols. In fact, the most common theme is the aurochs, the most important hunting and later breeding animal. Immediately afterwards, however, come humanoid figures, the largest and most elaborate of them with inwardly turned feet. They say they could be flying magicians or gods."

"Of course, that catches the pre-astronaut's attention."

"Exactly. Why are there so many engravings in a high valley that is not easy to reach, where storms and inclement weather coming in from the Mediterranean often rage with unchecked force?"

"Because aliens landed there, maybe Arkonides? Have you been able to discover any other clues?"

"No. But I spent most days with the superintendent of the national park, who showed me around. A true enthusiast, especially when it comes to the herb Génépi."

"I can understand that. Arthameter is extracted from another Artemisia subspecies, namely the annual mugwort, which is used to treat malaria as recommended by the World Health Organization, along with lumefantrine. It was nice and instructive to chat with you." Celia got up. "Unfortunately, I have to get back to work. The irrigation of the domed garden still puzzles us. In addition, before I arrived, someone screwed up the fertilizers...not intentionally, of course. At some point, labels on barrels were accidentally swapped."

Truly accidentally? He wanted to ask, but he didn't.

To him there seemed to be too many unfortunate coincidences,

but he didn't want to express his suspicion that a saboteur might be at work at Bradbury Base without solid evidence. It would not have been conducive to the already strained mood and his own position within the station crew.

In any case, he had decided to keep his eyes and ears open. For his amateur detective investigations, he had even come up with a rather meaningful camouflage.

Since a historian on Mars was, according to the undisguised opinion of Louanne Riembau, about as urgently needed as a deep-sea diver in the Sahara, he had offered to work as a chronicler of the Mars mission. Of course, all relevant scientific findings were meticulously documented anyway, and Riembau also kept a logbook of the station.

The personal experiences, reflections, and respective histories of the colonists, however, were not recorded. Therefore, he planned to conduct interviews with various members of the crew, if they were willing to devote some of their meager free time to his endeavor. The commander had exactly been enthusiastic about the idea, but she also hadn't banned the project from the outset. It had made sense to her that, for obvious reasons, he wanted to start with the longest-serving ones. However, he was to leave her in peace. Her time was too precious for that.

Aescunnar didn't mind; Riembau was probably above suspicion.

With Hetcher, the historian was making progress. Not exactly frenzied; when asked if he wanted to chat, Aescunnar's roommate brusquely denied far more often than he agreed.

Even though he was gracious, the conversation naturally faltered. In addition, the tablet's translation software occasionally interspersed grammatical inaccuracies. If Aesunnar reflexively commented on them, a mistake he repeatedly made as a notorious know-it-all, there was an additional delay.

Nevertheless, they made progress. In baby steps. Hetcher was not exactly forthcoming with information about himself, and Aescunnar

had to pull it out of his fleshy nose.

Some things, the Ferron flatly refused to reveal. For example, he was stubbornly silent about his exact age. Judging by the wrinkled skin, he probably had his best years behind him. His sparse hair was also an indicator of more advanced age.

Aescunnar approached Hetcher with innocuous topics. How did he like the canteen food? Quite good. He hardly resorted to the typical food that the Ferrons were theoretically entitled to at the station. Most of the human food was digestible for him, some even tasty. He loved potatoes; in his homeland, there was a very similar staple food, which was called Farouk. Chewing grain, however, he missed and even more so Bilah tea, for which the Earthly tea varieties were only inadequate substitutes. On the other hand, he greatly appreciated the plantains harvested in the dome garden, especially baked out as thin slices, with yogurt and garlic sauce.

Had he visited Earth?

"Only briefly. A nice planet."

"Nice? What do you think of Terrania?"

"Was only there for a short time. The little bit I saw was too hectic for me."

"Don't you find the general euphoria contagious? After all, the cosmos opened up to us within just a few months."

"I can understand, but I don't necessarily have to be part of it."

"The tranquility of Bradbury Base is more your thing?"

"Yes."

So he liked Mars?

Oh yes. It turned out that Hetcher had spent most of his life on a comparable planet: Ablon, the tenth world of the Vega system. Animatedly, he described the extensive horsetail forests, whose roots held the fertile red earth, the green-blue sky, the vineyards on

the slopes of the canyons.

However, when Aescunnar asked if he had been born on Ablon, or if not, on which of the other worlds, Hetcher immediately shut down again.

The conversation became more accessible when Aescunnar, for his part, reported on the people, in particular on how various historical writers had imagined Mars. Hetcher already knew that the station was named in honor of Ray Bradbury. He also knew the content of some chapters of the *Mars Chronicles*, although the stylistic subtleties and sublevels did not reach him.

The prominent place in the mythology of various terrestrial cultures the Red Planet had occupied, however, was new to Hetcher. On the other hand, he said, this was logical, since the small solar system of humans had so few worlds, unlike the forty-two planets in the Vega system.

Cyr saw the Ferron laugh heartily for the first time after recounting an episode of the television series *Twilight Zone*. It was about two astronauts who flew to Mars on a rocket. One, Marcusson, was a supporter of positive thinking and convinced that intelligent beings were in principle equally well-intentioned everywhere. The other, Conrad, held a more cynical view; no matter which planet, he trusted the character of humanoids to be basically malicious.

Marcusson died in the crash landing. Alone and plagued by fear, Conrad heard rhythmic knocking on the ship's hull. His fear turned to surprised joy when he opened the floodgates and found Martians who looked humanoid and treated him with exquisite courtesy. Especially a beauty named Teenya, who got his imagination going as well as his hormones...the hospitable locals, who possessed the parapsychic gift of telepathy, brought Conrad to an almost princely residence, furnished like the suite of an Earthly luxury hotel. He thought he had found paradise until he noticed that the rooms had no windows and the front door was locked.

Immediately afterwards, a complete wall went up. Behind them

were bars on which hung a sign. Conrad took it off and read it. It said: *"Earthling in natural habitat."* He had landed in a Martian zoo!

At the end of the episode, Conrad knelt on the ground, raised his arms to the sky, and wailed, "Marcusson! Marcusson, you were right! People are really the same everywhere..."

This turn of events amused Hetcher very much.

Sheriff Idris al-Sharif, the civil engineer and security chief of the station, was much more willing to provide information about himself. Although he was only 34 years old, he had already had three failed marriages and paid even more for each divorce than the previous one. He had already renounced the wealthy Egyptian entrepreneurial family from which he came during his studies in England.

"Now I am practically down to subsistence level. But that's the beauty of Mars: there's no bailiff up here. Private property plays no role at Bradbury Base, and wealth does not mean financial capital, but professional skill."

"In addition to the reputation of space adventure and the scientific challenge, some Mars colonists seem to have a certain disgust for the adversities of life on Earth," said Aesunnar.

"You might be right. Certainly, many of us share a solitary dedication to research and development, to the detriment of normal family life. I am convinced that children will be born on Mars in the foreseeable future. But for the time being, it would be too early for that. We are only the forerunners of the real settlers, and our little 'Commune of Hermits' is quite well suited to it, I think."

"A collective of individualists?"

"Paradoxical, but true. You will soon discover that we do have some strange ones among us. However, the cliché of the mad scientist striving for world domination is guaranteed to be fulfilled by none of us."

“You’re the head of security. Have you ever had to use your sheriff’s power?”

“Very rarely. A political discussion between two hotheads that degenerated into a shove. Hints of bullying. Arguments about who gets the bigger desk... So far, I have been able to limit myself to issuing warnings. Basically, we’re a comfortable bunch.”

“And the cooperation with the Ferrons?”

“Runs flawlessly, completely friction-free. Their gratitude to Perry Rhodan and thus to humanity knows no bounds. Although we are truly beginners compared to them in the field of terraforming, not a single one of them has let that make them arrogant while they were at the station. Extremely pleasant, perhaps with one exception. You know who I mean.”

Aescunnar nodded. “Has Hetcher ever been guilty of something that would cause the other Ferrons to renegade him on the sidelines at Bradbury Base? Apart from his, ahem, behavioral problems?”

“No. Neither to them nor to us. And obstinacy is not a crime.” Al-Sharif winked. “Especially not in the Martian colony.”

Despite his good intentions, the historian could not manage more than one interview per day. He was able to dispose of his time more freely than most others. But he desperately needed the recovery periods. Every stay outdoors drained him as if he had been on a mountain tour with fifteen hundred meters of altitude in one go.

System maintenance services included the regular inspection of the external depots. In the desert soil around Bradbury Base, bays had been dug out, which served as storage for autonomous probes and various spare parts, but also as a garage for the Mars mobiles. Tarpaulins protected against dust storms, which occurred especially during the Martian spring and sometimes covered large parts of the surface. Since the planet’s axis of rotation was tilted 25 degrees and 12 minutes against the orbital plane, there was a change of seasons, as on Earth. However, these lasted almost twice as long as Earthly ones; moreover, its duration varied because Mars’s orbit around the

Sun was more elliptical than Terra's.

The dust particles in the thin atmosphere made the sky appear a pale yellow to orange-brown hue. The atmospheric pressure on the surface averaged 6.36 hectopascals, only 0.63 percent of Earth's pressure at sea level, which is why water could not exist in liquid form, except for a short time in the lowest-lying areas. In addition, the Martian atmosphere was able to store little solar heat. Therefore, the temperature differences were enormous, between around twenty degrees Celsius during the day and up to minus 85 degrees at night near the equator.

As little as Aescunnar loved his spacesuit, he made sure before each mission that it worked without issue. It was pathetically primitive compared to the Arkonide battle suit he had worn on the Titan. He had also found Saturn's moon more exciting. Some researchers at the base were overwhelmed by hymn-like superlatives about the Martian landscape. He could not understand their enthusiasm. What was so great about an endless, rusty red desert? He also gained little from the feeling of exposure. He rather blocked it out, got tunnel vision, and concentrated on the tasks at hand.

On the way back from the bays, he pondered why Homer G. Adams had sent him to Mars. Not for the first time, he wondered what the administrator expected from him. Adams was a prudent man. Had he at least considered the same conclusion as Aescunnar based on the accumulation of mishaps?

But if Adams thought sabotage was possible, why hadn't he mentioned it? He had just said, "Use your critical, flexible mind, your insatiable curiosity, and the unbiased view of the outsider. Question every truth, every assertion. Unravel the secrets of Mars!"

Was there a hint in there that the historian had not recognized at the time? Or was he seeing ghosts?

Tired of death, he just wanted to fall into bed. But this time, Hetcher was in the mood for communication. He excitedly explained that he had rummaged through the station media library and found another subtitled episode of *Twilight Zone* related to

Mars.

“I came across a very interesting detail.”

“Which one?”

“You have to see it with your own eyes. Please! It only takes half of one of your base time sessions.”

Since the Ferron was so keen on watching the half-hour show with him, Aescunnar relented and loaded the video onto his tablet.

The episode was from 1961 and was originally titled “Will The Real Martian Please Stand Up? It turned out to be quite skillfully written, staged, and acted.

In heavy snow, two police officers examined a plane wreckage, considering the possibility that it could have been a flying saucer. Footprints led to a small restaurant where the passengers of a bus waited for a nearby bridge to be reopened to traffic. There was a disagreement about the number of original bus passengers. Had one of them recently joined the group and could thus be the crashed alien, the Martian? An old man joked that this was not a Ray Bradbury story! Which was correct, Aescunnar interjected, because the script had been written by another author.

Strange things happened. The lights went off and on, the jukebox suddenly turned on by itself, sugar bowls on the tables exploded. Finally, the news came that the bridge was passable, and the bus, escorted by the police in the patrol car, continued its journey.

Only a short time later, one of the passengers returned alone. The bridge had collapsed, including the bus and police car, and killed all occupants except him. The cook asked how he had survived without even getting wet.

Wet? He did not know that word, said the guest, holding the coffee cup with one hand, stirring with the other, lighting a cigarette with the third.

Oh!

The three-armed man revealed to the cook that he came from Mars and that his planet was planning an invasion of Earth. *Too late,* laughed the cook. He himself was from Venus and his people had long since founded a colony on Earth. The Martian fleet no longer stood a chance.

Then came the scene that so excited Hetcher. The cook lifted his cap and showed the Martian a third eye. Just like the Thort of the Ferrons!

"I must disappoint you," Aescunnar said regretfully. "The third eye is a popular motif in Earthly mythology. As a forehead chakra, it is described early in written history in the Upanishads of the Brahmins. We're talking about writings that were composed centuries before the beginning of our era and have also left traces in numerous other cultures."

Perhaps there are still common historical roots, Hetcher argued.

"I'm the last person who would categorically rule out a connection to Ferrol, but honestly, I don't think it's very likely. To date, there is no additional evidence." He yawned. "Of course, nothing is impossible."

His eyelids grew heavy. Nevertheless, he did not want to miss the opportunity. Who knew when Hetcher would be so accessible again?"May I ask you a personal question? Your...speech impediment. Were you born that way or did you have an accident? How did it happen?"

Instantly, the Ferron stiffened. His deep-set eyes, a result of the high UV radiation of Vega, flashed angrily. With his lips pressed together, he typed, *"I'm not disabled. I perceive that I communicate wonderfully when I want. Always been like this. I don't miss anything!"*

He pushed the tablet down to Cyr, stood up, and jerkily pulled the dividing curtain in the middle of the cabin so that the rings on the bar rattled.

Aescunnar had made a fool of himself. For the first time, a

friendship had been built up between the two of them, and he had carelessly torn the bond.

His fatigue was no more an excuse than Hetcher's unpredictable hypersensitivity. No, it was his fault that he had to start all over again.

8.

The True Catastrophe

It was the same picture, the same detail. But the sight of sparkling, distant stars in the blackness had lost all its romance. The auspicious exotic background from which the *Starlight Revue* derived its name had turned into an acute, frighteningly close threat.

Only the forcefield separated those trapped in the hangar from the deadly vacuum. It was supposed to be completely transparent and yet was repeatedly covered by disturbing grayish wafts and multicolored, iridescent, finely ramified cracks. The protective sphere was still holding. However, in view of the visible changes, no doubt many thought that the projectors could fail at any moment and the protective field would follow.

A few meters in front of it, emotionally almost in free space, Rhino and a handful of technically savvy people tried to find the locking mechanism of the huge hangar airlock. Such an important device had to be operable despite a power failure! But there was no switch, lever, or other control element to be seen.

Employing everything that could be used as a makeshift tool, they dismantled the lining of the inner wall. Massive struts and armor plates made of Arkon steel came to light, but no moving parts of the bulkhead. Apparently, its mechanics ran just behind the outer shell.

Faye Pendergrast, third flight engineer, had the inspiration to examine the floor as well. They hastily removed the carpets studded with shiny sequins made of hologram foil, which Kutschker had attached. After uncovering a larger area in front of the airlock opening, they discovered a square lid near the right frame, similar to a trapdoor. Three men managed to lift the heavy lid. In the cavity below ran a simple metal rod, around which a chain about two fingers thick was wound, with numerous turns and an oversized handle at the end.

“Well, then,” said Pendergrast triumphantly. “Here’s the emergency switch. I assume there are transmission gears installed between the shaft and lock elements. Which of these fine gentlemen wants to act as a ‘Close-Sesame’?”

A good-two-meter-tall technician with the figure of a bodybuilder bent down towards the handle and pulled on it. But as much as he flexed his muscles, it wouldn’t move a millimeter.

“*Pizdets!”* Rhino cursed in Russian. “This device isn’t made for us.”

The flight engineer agreed. “Logical. Arkonides don’t get their hands dirty. For this, they have physically stronger auxiliary people or…”

“Robots!” several bystanders shouted at once.

“I quite agree,” said Pendergrast. Resigned, she slumped her shoulders. “Unfortunately, the connection to the rest of the ship is broken, we’re locked up, and we don’t have robots here.”

“We do,” said Rhino.

“Where?”

“Praise be to Franz Ferdinand Kutschker! He imagined that the audience had to be served by robots.”

“The waiters? I thought they were costumed actors.”

“Well, the difference is often not visible to the naked eye.”

The quickly assembled service manager used his authority over the twenty near-humanoid multi-purpose servos, which had been clad in papier-mâché to make them look more cybernetic. A long rod was pushed through the handle, and humans and machines joined forces.

Despite the support of the robots, it was quite a bit of work until they had closed the bulkhead. Rhino and his companions stood sweating and gasping for air, too exhausted to congratulate each

other.

The gigantic technician gasped, “Okay. Next, we’ll take on the bulkhead to the ship’s interior.”

A woman’s voice sounded from the direction of the tasting islands, which Rhino identified as that of his sous-chef, Apeke Koulacoutou. “Blessed iboga root, stand by us! Look, the wall!”

Rhino stormed to the opposite side of the hangar. The wall behind the buffet had stains. Reddish spots.

Glowing reddish spots.

“What about Hangar C?” asked Rhodan, alarmed.

“Cut off, out of reach from the inner ship,” Thora explained curtly. “A fire is blocking the way there. It has also cut through all supply lines and is still spreading.”

“Despite the sprinkler systems?”

“It is no ordinary fire,” replied the Arkonide commander, flat and pressed, as if she had to overcome herself.

Crest’s eyes widened. “By the twelve heroes of Berlen Taigonii! You don’t mean to say that...”

“I’m afraid so. The energy signature leaves little room for doubt.” Thora rotated a holo surface so that her foster father and mentor could see better. “We are dealing with an Arkon bomb. As a result of the failed transition, it must have been ignited.”

“This... This is appalling. How did it get on board? I would never have allowed...”

“What is an Arkon bomb?” asked Bull.

Thora ignored him. “Believe me, Crest; I swear by all that is sacred to me that I knew as little as you did of the existence of this weapon. No one knew about it. It is not listed anywhere.

Apparently, it was hidden in the adjacent hangar area. It was activated due to interference from the poorly executed hyperspace jump."

"What is an Arkon bomb?" Bull repeated insistently.

Crest's eyes watered, a sign of his anxiety. "The ultimate weapon. Its effect is devastating. It was developed in the darkest days of the war against the Methanes and used to wipe out entire worlds. Not an achievement I would be proud of."

"But somehow the fire must be contained," said Rhodan, desperately clinging to straws.

"Not exactly." Thora shook her head slowly. "After it's ignited, an Arkon bomb ignites a nuclear fire that covers all chemical elements with an atomic number higher than ten. Through hard hyper-radiation, the atomic nuclei of these elements are hyper-energetically stimulated. They then fuse, releasing the same radiation. According to the snowball principle, a chain reaction occurs that jumps from atomic nucleus to atomic nucleus. Once triggered, it cannot be stopped."

"If one or more Arkon bombs detonate on a planet," Crest added in a hoarse voice, "it will fall victim to the nuclear fire within a few hours or days, depending on its composition. The planet will be completely destroyed."

The perversity of this weapon of mass destruction almost took Rhodan's breath away, but there was no time to deal with the moral implications. "I suppose the same goes for a spaceship?"

"Of course." Thora's face tightened. "There is only one way to save the *Tosoma*. We have to blow off the affected part before the nuclear fire can spread to the transition engine."

"There are over six hundred people trapped in Hangar C!"

The Arkonide avoided his gaze. "You must sacrifice their lives for the sake of your comrades and our mission."

Now that they knew they were threatened by fire, they felt the temperature in the room rising all the more strongly. Was it their imagination that the air was becoming increasingly stale and stuffy? Or was the oxygen gradually running out, perhaps escaping into the vacuum through tiny gaps in the energy shield and bulkhead?

Rhino tried not to cause panic, to bring order to chaos. Supported by his cooks, who were also used to giving clear and precise orders, he organized various task forces.

One group converted parts of the seating into makeshift couches for those still weakened by the aftermath of the equalization shock. Others helped in the triage section, which was run by a resolute nurse. As fate would have it, the only doctor present had suffered a circulatory collapse.

The bodies of the five deceased so far had been discreetly moved to a remote corner and covered with tablecloths. Among them was Rhino's young, gifted Scottish sous-chef, Alistair MacAllister, who had succumbed to severe internal injuries without regaining consciousness.

The group of technicians around flight engineer Faye Pendergrast searched for more hidden emergency facilities. It was possible that a shielded reserve data line could be dug up somewhere, through which contact with the bridge could be made. The chance was certainly slim, but on the other hand, everything possible was likely being done from inside the ship to establish communication. Perhaps, if they were lucky, they could meet in the middle, so to speak.

Volunteer guards positioned themselves at intervals of a few meters in front of all hangar walls in order to be able to sound the alarm if the embers spread farther or the fire broke through. How to react to this if necessary remained an open question. But that was not the main point. It was important that as many people as possible had something to do so that they had as little opportunity as possible to panic or ponder their desperate situation.

Rhino had learned this from Sergei Sergeyevich Kiryakov, the captain of the *Svyatel Nikolay*, officially called *Project 955A of the*

Borey class. The pride of the Russian Navy, the most advanced nuclear submarine in the fleet, named after both the wind god Boreas and Saint Nicholas, had run aground in the North Sea for unknown reasons; to this day, there have been rumors of sabotage.

Kiryakov, an outright abomination of a superior, rightly decried as a scoundrel, choleric, and great drunkard, had suddenly shown leadership and assigned everyone on board, without exception, a task, no matter how unimportant. Rhino had been condemned to smear sandwiches, covering them with Sevruga caviar and distributing them among the crew. It may have been thanks to Kiryakov that he had later embarked on his career as a chef. In any case, the orders of the hated captain, in retrospect, had turned out to be absolutely correct.

Mentally bowing to Kiryakov, Rhino ordered his cooks back to the supply islands. He loudly announced that the buffet was still open and was trying to fulfill even unusual special requests.

“Wise,” Apeke Koulamoutou whispered to him as she began fileting marinated yams with a frighteningly large knife. “No one shall die hungry.”

“No!” cried Rhodan. “No, and again no! Blowing off Hangar C is out of the question.”

“Think I’m cold, if you like,” Thora replied, “but we have no choice. Do you imagine I enjoy sentencing six hundred halfway intelligent creatures to death? But it’s them or all of us. I appreciate your thoughts, but sentimentality is inappropriate.”

“You always have a choice.” Rhodan noted her choice of words ‘halfway intelligent’ in his thoughts for later. If there was a later. “How much time do we have left?”

“I’m relying on estimates. Little, that much is certain. Maybe half an hour; then the nuclear fire will have eaten through to the engine shell and we will definitely be history.”

“Thirty minutes. What’s stopping us from putting out a distress

signal?”

“Reason and knowledge of the galacto-political situation. We are on the outermost periphery of the Great Empire. The distance to Arkonide territory is almost a thousand light years. The hyperspace jump, whose partial failure incidentally was caused by an asynchronously operating structure field converter, ended a little over two hundred light years shorter than planned and programmed. The range of the on-board transmitter is ninety light years, and outside the Empire there are only sporadic relay stations, if at all. Our distress signal would go nowhere. Or it would attract interstellar pirates to whom we would be helplessly exposed. I stand by this: we must get rid of the external sectors that were contaminated by the Arkon bomb.”

“Give me fifteen minutes. No, twenty. Take care of the transition engine and the general safety of the *Tosoma*. Reg and I, we’ll take care of the people at the *Starlight Revue* trapped in Hangar C.”

“As already mentioned, I still have too little information to be able to give an exact time. Therefore, I cannot give you an ultimatum.” Thora raised her left eyebrow. “All right. Try your best, Rhodan; you have my blessing. However, as soon as there is a risk that the irreplaceable regions and vital units of this ship, for which I am responsible as commander, will succumb to nuclear fire, I will immediately trigger the demolition of Hangar C.”

Crest stepped forward to mediate, but Rhodan and Bull had already communicated without saying a word and left the bridge. They hurried towards the living quarters.

“The teleporters?” asked Bull from the corner of his mouth.

“The teleporters,” Perry confirmed. “Chubai, Kakuta, and your new friend, Gucky. Who else?”

9.

Sand

Aescunnar and Hetcher embarked on their first joint long-distance mission. In a Mars mobile and in a thoroughly cool, not to say icy, mood.

For two full days and nights, Hetcher had evaded all advances. The curtain between the flatbeds remained closed even during the day. On the other hand, the Ferron had stoically accepted when Louanne Riembau gave the two of them the order to go out together. They were to handle maintenance for one of the supply stations on the way to the south pole.

In the Planum Austreale, the largely flat region south of the 75th parallel, covered by a permanent polar ice cap of frozen water and carbon dioxide about three kilometers thick, the colonists had built the second largest Mars station, Sinharat Base. It was a smaller version of Bradbury. Constantly manned by twenty specialists, it served to mine the frozen water deposits at the south pole.

Most of the extracted ice was transported weekly to the main station, with simple tow ferries coupled to Mars mobiles. At intervals of about five hundred kilometers, makeshift bivouacs had been set up along the route, primitive life rafts consisting of a standard container module, each with adequate extensions.

After Aescunnar had climbed into the bubble with Hetcher and the Ferron had taken control, they drove out into the rust-red desert. The roughly egg-shaped vehicle, the result of a symbiosis of Earthly and predominantly Ferron technology, was almost three meters long and two meters wide. The elongated, largely transparent vehicle, mounted on six large wheels filled with air, could be tinted as desired.

The interior offered space for “two plus one person”: there were two seats next to each other and, behind them, an emergency seat. In practice, this meant that with two people, the vehicle was able to

operate autonomously for a relatively long time. Three of them could survive, albeit only for a shorter period.

The electric motor was nearly inaudible. Only the occasional slight squeak of the shock absorbers broke the almost-palpable silence. Thanks to the separate suspension and control of each wheel, the Mars mobiles were extremely maneuverable. Normally, Wei Si Ping had assured them, they could also master difficult terrain without major problems.

Hetcher flipped a toggle on the clear, sparsely equipped dashboard. From above, whirring, rustling, and clacking noises sounded in rapid succession, and the huge awning unfolded. Immediately afterwards, another bar appeared on the screen next to the steering wheel, which slowly began to grow.

As far as Aescunnar could tell, Hetcher drove briskly, but with all due caution. Without a shade sail, a bubble theoretically reached a top speed of 55 kilometers per hour. The maximum, permanently maintainable speed on flat terrain without obstacles was limited to 31 kilometers per hour, Aescunnar had learned. The vehicle's on-board computer, which also acted as a fairly reliable autopilot, prevented this mark from being exceeded, as the increased energy consumption would jeopardize a return to the base or to another supply point.

He leaned back in his seat and surrendered to the view. Boiling hot, he remembered where he was. *You're not in Kansas anymore*, to quote little Dorothy's insight from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. He involuntarily hummed the melody of "Somewhere over the Rainbow" to himself.

Hetcher turned his head sideways, looked at Cyr and immediately looked away again.

Interesting.

Was the Ferron not as deaf as he pretended? Or was he just noticing the extra vibrations? Cyr remembered reading about a percussionist who had less than twenty percent of his hearing and still performed with the world's most famous orchestras, gave solo

concerts, and held master classes. What was her name? Right, Evelyn Glennie. She allegedly hoarded around two thousand different percussion instruments, and her autobiography entitled *Good Vibrations* had achieved bestseller status. She also owned a photo agency, a jewelry label, a merchandising company, and a consulting company.

She probably wouldn't be on Mars anytime soon...

The transparent dome bubble gave him the unsettling feeling of being right in the strange, not at all homely landscape. Hostile desert wherever his eye wandered. Of course, they were wearing their protective suits, which also, as it was so nicely said, took over the disposal of metabolic end products. Nevertheless, he had felt more comfortable in the container catacombs at Bradbury Base.

Perhaps the fact that the proportions within the cabin seemed wrong was contributing to his uncertainty. They were designed for Ferrons. And the blue-skinned inhabitants of the Vega system were, for all their striking similarities, on average shorter and wider than terrestrial humans. Other differences, such as the fact that Ferrons did not sweat but regulated their body temperature through increased salivation, only became apparent when there were spittoons all over the station.

An hour passed, then a second. The environment hardly changed. They followed the course of the canyon, which was actually a huge trough valley three to four kilometers wide, with impregnably steep side walls at least that high. The vehicle carrying the historian and Hetcher, who had switched to autopilot and was dozing motionlessly, represented a tiny foreign body, like a louse crawling through an almost infinitely long, empty swimming pool.

A nasty surprise awaited them at the supply station.

Aescunnar had taken the wheel for the last two hours to gain driving experience. He parked the bubble, whose awning was folded back in, in the provided furrow created by a construction machine. Then, he and Hetcher unloaded boxes that were to be used to replenish the station's supplies. They covered the Mars mobile with

a tarpaulin according to regulations, although in the next few hours, according to the forecast of the meteorologists, there was no risk of sandstorms.

Hetcher walked forward to the entrance. He had been here many times. After a few rather elegant jump steps, each of which carried him over several meters, he stopped and waved his arms, as he often did when he wanted to communicate something.

Once Aescunnar caught up with him, he saw the mess. As it had proven itself with the larger bases, this container module was also sunk into the ground so that the roof was just below ground level. The entrance was through an outstanding, cabin-like lock, which was strikingly reminiscent of a historic British telephone booth and thus of the incredible spaceship, the *TARDIS*, from the classic television series *Doctor Who*. However, the door was wide open, and there was no Timelord in the airlock, but...sand.

A lot of red Martian sand; way too much.

It turned out that the bottom flap had not been closed either. As a result, the main module of the supply station had been completely filled with sand by the wind.

“Crap,” Aescunnar muttered . How could this have happened? He faced Hetcher and waved his own arms to get his attention. Actually, he had wanted to save this coup for their long awaited rest back at the station. But circumstances demanded that he come out with it now.

He could tell that it had worked by how Hetcher reacted. Stunned, the Ferron threw up his arms. He gestured in the same sign language the human had used to tell him that they could now communicate this way.

The helmet camera captured their signs, and the spacesuit computer transmitted them either in writing or sound. The historian’s internal loudspeaker said, “You shame me, Aescunnar. How did you manage to learn this language system?”

Aescunnar gestured for him to turn on the helmet screen. Then

he radioed, “Learning would be too much to say. My vocabulary is still very limited.” He saw Hetcher read the sentences as they were translated into Ferron, and continued. “I have noticed that you often talk to yourself, namely in said sign language. I have used the past few days to analyze the gestures. Video documents as a data basis are abundant at Bradbury Base. Mirjam Marakiç, the software expert, helped me set up a translation program. Now you don’t have to type if you want to tell me something.”

The Ferron acted as though he had been struck by lightning. He nodded slowly, once, twice, three times. Finally, he gestured, “Respect. I wouldn’t have thought you could do that. You’re a historian.”

“Yes. And history is the science of life.” Aescunnar refrained from remarking that even Hetcher shared the common prejudices against his profession. “The better you understand life and the living, the better you understand history.”

“Again, I’m impressed. I’m sorry I’ve been so dismissive recently.” The Ferron pointed in the direction of the airlock. “We must take care of this as a matter of urgency.”

“I’ll go back to the bubble and make radio contact with Bradbury Base.”

“That’s a good suggestion. Tell them I’m looking for tools now. As far as I know, there is a powerful pump in an external depot with which we may be able to suck out the sand. If that doesn’t work, we’ll have to shovel it ourselves.”

After uncovering the Mars mobile and driving it out of the furrow, Aescunnar reached Bradbury Base on his first attempt. The radio operator on duty immediately connected him to Wei Si Ping.

He described the condition in which they had found the supply station. “Whoever was there last messed up. Or played a bad trick on the Mars mission. I mean, how can you forget to seal the lock?”

“It’s absolutely inexplicable to me. Wait a minute, I’ll call up the

logs." Just a breath later, Wei said, "The last visitors were Kendix and Obermaier, one of the mixed exploration duos. Reliable people to whom I'd entrust my life. In addition, they expressly stated that they had left the airlock in a properly closed state. There are even recordings of the helmet cameras that prove it. I could give it to you..."

"No need; I believe you. No one else has been to the station since?"

"None of us."

"Hm. Or someone who can falsify or circumvent the logs."

"I will look through the absence lists and records of the position data. But I can't imagine that anyone would seize a Mars mobile and cover such a distance with it without being noticed."

"Well, the wind has no fingers. And since there is no evidence of autochthonous life on Mars, we are faced with a mystery."

"Not quite. The airlock mechanism can be activated from the outside by radio. It's not very likely, but can't be completely ruled out, that a quasi-errant impulse caused the unintentional opening."

"Both the outer door and the trapdoor? That must have been a special, capable, and nasty impulse."

"Unlikely, as I said, but theoretically within the realm of possibility. I will arrange for a review of the radio logs."

Cyr swallowed what had been on his tongue. If the confidant of the station commander did not talk about potential sabotage on his own, he did not want to sow discord, especially not from a distance of about five hundred kilometers. "Hetcher is looking for tools. We'll try to get the station back in shape, but I can't promise anything. In any case, our stay will last longer than planned."

"Of course. Please get in touch at regular intervals of two hours and report on how you're both progressing. If the matter proves too difficult for you, we will send you reinforcements. However, I would prefer it if we could do without. You know, the shortage of

staff..."

"We'll do our best."

"Good luck, Cyr."

"We may need that. Greetings from me to Louanne Riembau. Aescunnar, out."

The pump worked reasonably well. Nevertheless, it was hard work. Since they had no interest in staying longer than absolutely necessary, they could not avoid shoveling.

To Aescunnar's astonishment, the masses of sand had not caused any serious damage to the station's facilities. Important equipment and storage spaces were perfectly sealed; those who had planned the facility, probably with Ferron help, had been forward-looking enough to take such an extreme case into account.

Hetcher was completely absorbed in his tasks. It was a pleasure to watch him concentrated, determined, and working systemically. He didn't do any unnecessary steps. Although he didn't seem overzealous, rather almost ponderous, he made it much further in a short time. When the Terran was clumsy in his movements, the Ferron casually showed him how to do better.

After sweeping and vacuuming sand and dust from the farthest corners, they were able to remove the equipment covers and subject the units to a functional test. This was extremely positive. Aescunnar turned on the radio and gave Wei the good news that the supply station would soon be back in shape. He did not forget to mention that the main praise lay with Hetcher.

"I never suggested that he didn't have his qualities," said the geologist. "If only it weren't so difficult to deal with him!"

"Do you know the Andersen fairy tale of the ugly duckling?"

"That turns out to be a swan? Your optimism is honorable, but Hetcher seems pretty grown-up to me."

“One should never give up hope.”

“Or come to terms with the given. A Chinese proverb says, ‘Every family has a hard-to-read book. Come back safely!’” Wei concluded.

Aescunnar downloaded the list of radio messages received in recent weeks onto his tablet. At first glance, he couldn’t find anything conspicuous. He secured the list and would check it more thoroughly when he had a chance. He then helped Hetcher carry out maintenance on the equipment and replenish supplies.

On their way back, they talked animatedly by means of the translation program. The ice had definitely been broken. Hetcher even rambled on when he talked about the potential of terraforming. He enthusiastically described what Mars might look like one day. His people had managed to transform Ablon and other originally inhospitable planets into flourishing worlds. It would be laughable if humans did not do something similar with Mars. Of course, it would not happen overnight—one had to have patience and perseverance.

It seemed almost ludicrous amid the stunning yet deadly landscape of Mars, but Aescunnar felt a real connection to the Ferron for the first time. Bold thoughts had always impressed him. Hetcher never tired of hearing bizarre stories about the Red Planet and its fictional inhabitants; he could not get enough of them. So the historian rummaged through his memories.

He brought to light the Christian mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, who had published a book called *Life on Other Planets* in the middle of the eighteenth century. In it, he firmly claimed to communicate in a spiritual way with inhabitants of the Moon, Jupiter, Saturn, Mars, and Venus. However, he had had no contact with Neptune or Uranus, as they had not yet been discovered at the time.

Swedenborg’s supporters, who still existed, debated fiercely whether this shortcoming undermined the credibility of the other reports. In the novel *Red Star* from 1908, Mars was portrayed as a communist paradise. The author, Russian Alexander Bogdanov, also

developed a scientific discipline that would unite all social, biological, and physical sciences and explore the organizational principles common to them all. This “tectology” was now regarded as a precursor of systems theory.

Even one of the worst films of all time, according to widespread opinion, Aescunnar told the spellbound Ferron, was set on Mars. In *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians*, Santa Claus and two Earth children were kidnapped by Martian leaders, went on all sorts of adventures, and finally helped to install a Martian proxy of Santa himself. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a stage version of the originally unintentionally funny material had gained extraordinary success, he reported. In the town of Fullerton, California, the play was shown every year during the Christmas season.

“I love those crazy stories,” Hetcher said. “But one thing seems illogical to me: the authors never set foot on Mars. Their stories are therefore not about Mars as it is, but as they imagined it. You wouldn’t have had to come to the real Mars to understand these stories.”

“You’re right. At least, it doesn’t hurt to be here...but that’s not the real reason I came. I’m here because history is being made on Mars right now. It may sound a little pathetic, but I’m convinced that something big is happening here.”

Hetcher didn’t answer for a while. Then he agreed, “Yes, great things are happening here...”

10.

Everyone is Saved

In the hangar, the situation came to a head. It was getting hotter and hotter. At the same time, the oxygen content decreased due to a lack of fresh air supply.

Franz Ferdinand Kutschker tried to keep his hysteria in check. Being a theater or film director implied leadership and total vision. It was not for nothing that Federico Fellini was called *il faro*, the lighthouse. His reputation would have been tarnished forever if he had had a nervous breakdown in front of actors, technicians, and audiences, and turned from a practically omniscient directorial titan into a small heap of misery.

So he was cool on the outside despite the heat. The fact that the bald rhinoceros of a chef had seized command was right for him. From time to time, Kutschker would send small signs of gracious agreement in Rhino's direction: approving nods, encouraging gestures or shouts such as "Quite my opinion!" "Bravo, keep it up!" and "Excellent idea; that was on the tip of my tongue!"

Secretly, he struggled with his fate, but above all with himself. He could do nothing about the fact that the second transition step had obviously ended in disaster. On the other hand, it was to some extent his fault that they were now locked in this terrible hangar and had to fear for their mere survival.

It was he, Franz Ferdinand Kutschker, who had had the idea of showing the universe not as a projection, but for real, to be used as a stage brochure. He had succeeded in pushing through his resulting concept of the *Starlight Revue* against all objections from the ship's management. Could there be, he had argued, a more beautiful symbol of humanity's visionary departure to the stars, and specifically to Arkon?

Like most artists, Kutschker had proclaimed on every appropriate and inopportune occasion that it was sweet and honorable to make

sacrifices for art. However, he had always understood this more as a theoretical maxim, in a figurative, elevated sense. For example, in connection with budget allocations and subsidies of all kinds. In addition, he sacrificed his time, creativity, and creative power at the altar of the muses Thalia and Melpomene, the patron goddesses of comedy and tragedy, without too often lamenting his lot. But his life? In the worst case, he would have six hundred more on his conscience...

As an Austrian theater man, he was of course familiar with the Ringtheater fire. On December 8, 1881, shortly before the start of a performance of Jacques Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann*, the gas lighting of five showcases was ignited in the Theater am Wiener Schottenring, founded as the Komische Oper. Leaked gas exploded, the fire jumped over to the prop trains, and it spread quickly across stage and through the auditorium. Inadequate safety precautions such as improper emergency lighting, emergency exits opening inward, and a fatal misjudgment of the situation, where the police had denied access to emergency services with the comment, "Everyone is saved!" led to one of the greatest fire catastrophes of the nineteenth century. The death toll was 384, according to official figures, although estimates put the count even higher.

Kutschker got goosebumps when he noticed the many parallels between that catastrophe and the one unfolding aboard the spaceship. Was he a kindred spirit, an accomplice, perhaps even a reincarnation of the then Ringtheater director? Franz Ritter von Jauner, as the unfortunate man was called, had been sentenced to three months in prison for negligence, which seemed too lenient to many contemporaries. After that, he had never really recovered. In the end, he had shot himself on the same day that the bankruptcy of another one of his productions had become obvious.

Would Franz Ferdinand Kutschker's name go down in theater history just as ingloriously? He had imagined himself to be an interstellar pioneer and had wanted to open up the vastness of the galaxy to the Viennese School of Acting. Instead, his first performance outside the domestic solar system seemed to be his last.

And worst of all, if this losing streak continued, there wouldn't

even be any reviews...

Ever larger areas of the interior walls glowed red.

They radiated such heat that Apeke Koulamoutou and her colleagues had already pushed the cooking islands far into the center of the room. The delicacies they still offered were no longer particularly popular. People had lost their appetite. Most of them sat there apathetically. Perhaps they were trying to forget their predicament by thinking desperately of something else; perhaps they were trying to make their peace with the world or some god. She increasingly saw tears running down faces or shoulders twitching in silent sobs.

“Drinks are running low,” said Dritëra Zeqiri, the Albanian confectioner. Streams of sweat had long since destroyed her rosy makeup. “Especially the non-alcoholic ones.”

“As I feared.” After the transition, only a short conclusion of the revue had been planned, after which the event was supposed to be wrapped up relatively quickly. As a result, the remaining contingent of soft drinks was scarce and, now that people were sweating and thirsty, was rapidly running out. “Give out beer and light mixed drinks on request. But hold back the hard stuff. We don’t need any drunken rioters on our hands.”

In Apeke’s opinion, it was the uncertainty of their situation that was causing the most upset. All attempts by the technicians to establish a connection with the ship’s interior had failed. So no one had any idea what was going on and what condition the *Tosoma* was in. Was the whole ship already irretrievably lost and they just didn’t know it yet?

A collective outcry echoed through the hangar. Apeke looked around and saw why. Her heart jumped with joy. In the middle of the stage, three figures had appeared: two people and a creature only half as large with mouse ears, a beaver tail, and a single pointed tooth protruding from his mouth. All three wore spacesuits with the helmets folded back.

The Asian man, who was probably Tako Kakuta, stepped to the edge of the stage and bent down to the bystanders. Apeke didn't understand exactly what was happening, but shortly afterwards, Rhino climbed onto the stage and enthusiastically shook hands with the three teleporters.

After a brief conversation, he turned to the auditorium, spread his arms with outstretched fingers, and then lowered them centimeter by centimeter like a conductor demanding a decrescendo from his orchestra. Finally, a tense calm returned.

"Guys, I have good news," he announced. "First, the *Tosoma* is by no means stranded in the middle of nowhere and will be able to continue its flight after a repair stop."

Applause erupted, mixed with glaring whistles. Rhino was confused at first; then, he saw out of the corner of his eye that behind him, Kakuta and the gigantic Ras Tschubai were taking off their spacesuits.

"Secondly," he continued, "the three teleporters will provide us with protective suits while they gradually move us out of the hangar into the central sphere of the ship. Of course, we will start with the wounded and those who are otherwise in poor health. The transports are expected to take place about every minute, depending on how long our psychically gifted friends need to regenerate. I don't want to see any jostling, understood?"

"Aye, aye, sir!" jested some prankster.

In reply, Rhino hinted at a jagged salute. At least he got a little laughter. Undoubtedly, the mood had improved considerably since the appearance of the teleporters.

Rhino's guilty conscience gnawed at him because he had kept the negative component of the news under wraps for the time being. Kakuta had whispered to him that they were under extreme time pressure. Their Arkonide commander would be forced to blow up the outer area, which included Hangar C, in less than half an hour. Even Rhodan had only wrested this deadline from her by throwing

the whole weight of his person into the balance.

Anyone who mastered the basic types of calculation could see what this meant. Even if the teleporters actually freed an average of three people per minute from the hangar without getting so tired that the rest breaks became longer and longer, three times thirty resulted in a maximum of ninety who could be rescued. If it was assumed that in the opposite direction, Kakuta and Tschubai each brought one spacesuit and Gucky two, one came to one hundred and twenty protected people who had at least a small chance of survival if the hangar was blown off. The rest, almost four hundred people, would fall by the wayside...

Rhino grinned encouragingly and left the stage with the three teleporters, hurrying towards the makeshift hospital. Inwardly, he felt miserable. Soon, whether he liked it or not, he would have to come out with the bitter truth. After that, chaos, which he had successfully prevented so far, would break out in the hangar.

He desperately needed an idea for how to delay someone asking awkward questions for as long as possible...

After the chef, Rhino, had basked in the applause of the crowd but had not even bowed properly, he came straight to Kutschker.

“You’re needed,” he said, proletarian as always.

“If you would like me, as the official responsible, to approve your measures: gladly. I am perfectly in agreement. I would not act otherwise. It is almost spooky how you anticipate my orders, as if you can read my thoughts...”

“Get your artists together. We will continue with the revue. The last encore still hasn’t been performed.”

“What?” Kutschker thought he had misheard. “You can’t be serious.”

“And how serious I am! Whether you want to know or not, I’ve been in a similarly bad situation before—on the *Svyatitel Nikolay*, a

damaged nuclear submarine, at the bottom of the North Sea. The situation was hopeless. The men were about to tear each other apart in their desperation. Then Kiryakov, the captain, did something completely absurd. He gathered the crew and had us sing naval songs."

"Wouldn't it have been wiser to remain lying down in a way that spares energy and saves valuable breathing air?"

"Smarter, perhaps, but when it comes to mass panic, very few behave rationally. Kiryakov's order, which defied all the laws of reason, nevertheless ultimately proved to be correct. Singing prevented us from coming undone and brightened our spirits. We persevered until rescue arrived at the last moment."

"A heartbreaking anecdote, but...you're sure you're still in your right mind, Ugolyev?"

"All of us, Mr. Director, will lose our minds, with incalculable consequences, if we do not do something about it in time. The last encore will give us a few minutes of relaxation. Right now, that's a lot."

"We still don't have electricity. Performing artistic feats in poor lighting is dangerous."

"I've already thought of that. Kakuta will bring a mobile emergency generator with him for the next teleportation."

Kutschker, as he had learned and passed on to countless acting students, took a dramatic artistic break, during which he counted from twenty-one to twenty-five. Then he said, "After careful consideration, I agree with you. The show must go on, always! An iron maxim of the theater. Please excuse me."

He stood up and yelled to his assistant director, even though she was standing right next to him, "Prepare everything for the second encore, quick as you can!"

11.

Suicide?

The day after their return to Bradbury Base, Aescunnar and Hetcher were assigned to weed in the dome garden. This was a reward because it was one of the few system preservation services that could be done without spacesuits. Moreover, every stay in the transparent dome was perceived as pleasant, even if you spent hours in a stooped position.

Subsequently, he learned from Wei that no irregularities had been discovered during the review of the radio logs. All broadcasts from the station could either be assigned to routine activities or were among the numerous hitherto unsuccessful attempts to make contact with the missing commander Ngu-yen or to target his Mars mobile.

Without exception, all outgoing radio messages had been handled properly. So there had not been a single failed attempt that would have resulted in any unintentionally created, “wild” data bundles that might have triggered the mechanism of the air lock at the supply station, which would have been an extremely unlikely chain of coincidences anyway.

Thus, it remained a mystery who or what had opened the doors and let in tons of Martian sand.

“The sheriff will also launch an investigation,” Wei said, “as is his job as security chief. However, since things ended well and no serious damage was caused, I can’t imagine Idris will spend a lot of time and energy on it. He, like all of us, has more important things to do.”

The chief radio operator was called Pavel Smetana. In his main profession as a pharmacologist, he looked after the station pharmacy, where Aescunnar met with him. He was the next to agree to an interview.

Smetana was long and scrawny, a bag of bones with thin white-blond hair that hadn't seen a comb for a long time.

"So, you want to write a chronicle of Bradbury Base," he said in a guttural voice and a strong Slavic accent. "You have literary ambitions?"

"No, at least no serious ambitions. Frankly, I haven't thought of much else to make myself useful apart from maintenance duties. I understand the Chronicle Project to be a service to the community, and I write mainly for us and those who will come after us. Maybe it will become a fixed institution and later be continued by someone else. I don't pay much attention to literary quality."

"So you don't want to follow in Bradbury's footsteps."

"They would be too big for me, I'm afraid."

"Probably also for every one of us. What would you like to know from me?"

"Why did you come to Mars?"

"Hm. I could make it easy for myself and quote George Mallory, who, when asked why he wanted to climb Mount Everest, replied, 'Because it is there.'"

"Mallory and his partner Irvine's mission failed. Both fell victim to Everest. To this day, it's unclear if either of them actually reached the summit."

"I know. But does it matter? It is not the success, only the attempt that counts in the end, as a German poet, a Mr. Bolzheimer, once put it so beautifully, by the way, in a song about the mythological Icarus."

"Who flew too close to the sun."

"Well. Mallory, Icarus...human history is full of such heroes. But as you're a historian, I don't need to tell you that."

Aescunnar nodded conspiratorially. He had the feeling the

pharmacologist and radio operator was avoiding giving him a straight answer. Or he tended by nature to long-windedness. “You’re Czech?”

“From Brno, yes. Smetana means ‘sour cream.’ The Germans say ‘Schmand’ or ‘Schmetten,’ the Austrians and Swiss ‘Sauerrahm’ or ‘crème fraîche.’ My father had a pharmacy, which of course I was supposed to take over one day, but I rebelled and became a rock musician instead, although we are not related to the composer of the ‘Moldau.’ What does connect me to him, however, is that we both suffered from severe hearing impairments.”

“Tinnitus?”

“Exactly. In his last years, Friedrich Smetana heard by day and night ‘the shrill whistling of an A-flat major sexta chord in the highest registers of the piccolo flute,’ as he put it. Where his complaints came from, I do not know; I know very well the reason for mine. The parental business was excellently suited for drug experiments.”

“But now you’ve been cured of it.” Otherwise, he would not have passed the fitness test for the Mars mission.

“From ringing in the ears as well as from the drugs and overdriven guitar amplifiers. I understood the warning signs and finally studied pharmacy. But I still didn’t follow in my father’s footsteps exactly. Since I had already been involved with consumer electronics for a while anyway, I studied radio as a minor subject. By the way, my uncle and godfather, from whom I take my name, is an experimental artist. He processes image and sound material recorded by him for installations in such a way that the resulting images and sounds run counter to the acoustic and visual perception habits of the recipient. In this way, he tries to gain new insights into the dimensions of space and time. I am still in regular contact with him. I’m sitting at the source.”

This gave Aescunnar an idea. “I assume most crew members occasionally communicate with friends or relatives on Earth?”

“Yes, everyone has a contingent of private live radio messages.

Gladly so, despite the delay that takes some getting used to." Although Mars and Earth were closer than ever in 2037, each radio message took just over four minutes to cover the distance, Smetana recalled. "You can send messages practically unlimited, anyway."

"Does anyone stand out in particular, in the sense of a conspicuous amount of home contact? You understand, I'm interested in the human component of the Mars mission. Even scientists can get terribly homesick."

Smiling, Smetana thought about it. "Not that I know—well, at most, the other way around. Emily Tempsky, the New Zealand doctor." He held his hands in front of his chest as if weighing something very heavy. "She doesn't make use of it at all. Apparently, she has nothing to say about herself. A poor orphan without any loved ones, it seems. I would have offered myself as a comfort, but she rebuffed me, kindly but firmly."

"May I come back to the subject of drugs?"

"Gladly. I'm clean, if that's what you wanted to know; have been for many years."

"But isn't it the case that in extreme situations such as a Mars colony you have to assume an increased drug risk?"

"Of course. That's why they asked me if I wanted to take on this job here. Based on my own experience, I recognize the relevant symptoms earlier than most."

"And?"

Smetana shook his head, sending his white-blond strands of hair flapping. "For the time being, everything is clean. By the way, I also check my drug stocks almost daily to the milligram. Nothing is missing."

In their shared cabin, Hetcher was as buttoned up as ever, which suited Aescunnar well this time. On the one hand, on the way back to Bradbury Base, they had exchanged thoughts and stories for

hours, quite exhaustively. On the other hand, Aescunanr was now able to deal undisturbed with the file he had brought from the supply station.

The list of radio broadcasts received there contained nothing that, on the surface, indicated any form of sabotage. Nevertheless, he worked through the multi-page directory again and again. He was plagued by the feeling of being on the trail of the solution to the riddle, even of being close to it. What had he overlooked? Was he perhaps too close to the mystery? Too close to the trees to recognize the forest?

The thought that his own roommate could be behind the acts of sabotage had often forced itself on Aescunnar, but each time, he had rejected it. What motive could the Ferron have? Apart from senseless destructive rage, he could not think of any. There was no animosity between Hetcher's people and the Terrans; on the contrary, according to Wei, the Ferrons were literally overflowing with gratitude to Perry Rhodan.

Even if one took into account that Hetcher was also an outsider among them and to some extent self-centered, he had never shown the slightest antipathy towards humans in general, or any member of the workforce personally, from Louanne Riembau to Aescunnar himself. Sure, he often went his own way and didn't take some regulations all that seriously. But as Idris al-Sharif had so pointedly put it: obstinacy was not a crime per se, especially not in the Martian colony.

Added to this was Hetcher's passion for the terraforming project and the euphoria with which he had spoken about the future of the Red Planet the day before. For better or worse, this depended on the success of the Mars mission. He had proven that he cared a lot about it through his actions, and most recently, through his words.

No, if he were the saboteur, he would either have to be the best disguise artist Aescunnar had ever encountered or suffer from a personality split that had washed away. Aescunnar had also paid attention to signs of this in recent days and had not noticed the slightest. In his peculiar, gruff, and often dismissive way, Hetcher behaved in an extremely straightforward and undeterred manner.

The fact that Aescunnar had managed to gain access to him was an exception that rather confirmed the rule.

For a foreign influence by something like a posthypnotic command or a related parapsychic ability, on the other hand, there should also have been one or the other indication. Aescunnar did not consider himself infallible. But that he could deceive himself about such a person or, consciously or unconsciously, be deceived by him, he could rule out with a clear conscience.

Sighing, he picked up the radio logs again. What had he missed? What tiny detail was the answer? Senseless self-torture. The lines danced and blurred before his eyes, which he could hardly keep open anyway. He was dead tired, and his back hurt.

He decided to be wise and go to bed. After a few moments, he fell asleep.

An eerie, scratching sound woke him up. It sounded like someone was scratching the outer walls of the living container with a huge steel brush. But it was buried deep in the ground, wasn't it?

Dazed, Aescunnar looked at the luminous numerals of his wristwatch. He had only slept four and a half hours; it was the middle of the night.

The scratching frightened him. He called for Hetcher several times until he finally remembered that Ferron couldn't hear him. How stupid of him! He knocked back the ceiling, rubbed his hazy eyes, turned on the lights, stood up, stretched, and stretched again. Finally, he gently pulled aside the curtain that divided the cabin.

Hetcher's bed was empty. There was no trace of him. After checking the hygiene cell, Aescunnar put on his overalls and beloved Indiana Jones hat on a whim and stepped out into the hallway. The scraping and scratching became louder the more floors he left behind. A dull, low-frequency, barely audible roar was mixed with it.

He followed the sounds to the surface. There, he realized where

they were coming from: a huge sandstorm was passing over the dome and causing it to vibrate.

In a small clearing surrounded by vegetable beds and fruit trees, several people were standing around. Many of them had their heads tilted back and were looking up, strained, as if they could banish the storm with their eyes. Hetcher was not among them.

Aescunnar quickly found the station commander and her confidant. He joined them.

“Pretty scary, isn’t it?” Riembau had to scream to drown out the noise. “But don’t worry, the dome can withstand it. We’ve had this before. Our meteorological department has already given the all-clear; all measured values are far below any dangerous limits. In other words, everything is in the green.”

“Did the storm wake you?” inquired Wei, who managed to yell. “The scratching of the particles branches out via sound bridges to the farthest corner of Bradbury Base.”

“I noticed.”

“Our veterans say you’re not a real Martian until you’ve survived your first sandstorm. So welcome to the club!”

“Thank you! Have you seen Hetcher?”

“Not since you were both down here weeding. He isn’t here? Normally, such storms don’t bother him. He doesn’t hear anything anyway.”

“But he feels the vibrations, I think. Anyway, he’s not in our cabin.”

“Who knows what’s going on in his head?” The commander faltered and pulled her pod out of her pocket. She read the message and turned pale.

“What is it?”

“Hetcher.”

“Did something happen to him?”

“Not yet, but...according to camera recordings that the sheriff just accessed, he took a Mars mobile half an hour ago and drove off towards the center of the storm.”

“What? Why?”

“Don’t ask me. If anyone is an expert on him, it’s you.”

“On the other hand, you’ve known him longer. Has he ever done something like this?”

“He’s prone to going out on his own, but…no. Not in such a sandstorm.”

“Could he be suicidal?” asked Wei. “You’ve been with him a lot lately, Cyr. Have you noticed any suicidal tendencies?”

“Not in the least. He’s been opening up to me even more.” Aescunnar briefly described the form of communication they had established with each other. “He’s seemed like an open book lately by his standards.”

“My psychological training is limited to a handful of leadership courses,” said Riembau, so close to Aescunnar’s ear that he could smell her shower gel. “But can’t significant changes in behavior, even if they seem positive, be signs of a psychotic flare-up?”

“Sorry, my knowledge in this field is not far off from yours, apart from the fact that human psychology would be difficult to apply to a Ferron. No matter what led him to this madness, we have to bring him back in.”

“No.” The attractive French woman stiffened. “I can’t order anyone to risk their life for a crazy Ferron oddball!”

“If someone voluntarily—”

She spoke to him. “Don’t even think about it. Hetcher has made his decision. A rescue operation is hereby officially prohibited. It’s bad enough that we’ll probably lose another man and, with him,

another vehicle. I cannot allow our stock to be decimated anymore."

Aescunnar wanted to protest, but he swallowed his rebuttals. Riembau was the commander, and she did not give the impression that she would be persuaded. Moreover, if he was honest, he didn't have much to counter their argument.

He stayed with the henceforth silent group for a few more minutes. The storm did not subside; instead, it seemed to intensify.

"Well," Aescunnar said, yawning, "as sorry as I am for Hetcher, I can't do anything here. I will retire to my quarters. Better I try to sleep despite the unleashed elements."

"Very reasonable," Louanne Riembau praised him. "Good night."

Wei squinted at the historian but refrained from commenting.

12.

Jump, Jump, Jump

"It'll never work," Tschubai said to Perry, breathing heavily. "It's a fool's errand. There's no way to get everyone out or in protective suits."

"I know. But every life saved counts."

"Of course. Still, it pains me every time hundreds in the hangar stare at me hopefully and I realize that we have to leave most of them behind."

"I understand that very well. I haven't yet come to terms with the fact that there isn't a better solution. If only I could think of one!" Rhodan bit his lower lip. Since Thora's bad news, he had racked his brain, but his thoughts ran tough like tar. So much for quick thinking...

"Tako and I are already slowing down; we need longer and longer breaks. We won't even be able to keep the targeted cut. Gucky's skill is much more pronounced, but even he won't be able to make up for the deficit."

Initially, they had tried to jump in groups of three to join forces; however, this hadn't changed their regeneration times. Although the joint jump distance could have been extended in that way, everyone had to cope with the enormous mental and physical effort of teleportation on their own. Gucky could not accelerate the other two while they would have slowed him down.

"Don't blame yourselves," Rhodan said. "You're doing your best."

"I just can't help it. Although the chefs make the selection..." Tschubai shook his head, laughed bitterly and wiped his sweaty face. "It's the chefs, of all people, who decide between life and death. It is certainly not easy for them either."

A helper dragged over a space suit.

“I’ll be right there.” Tschubai lifted himself up, swaying precariously, and let the heavy suit lean against his chest. The helper took a step back, and then the Sudanese man disappeared with the suit.

Snapping, the air filled the resulting vacuum. Less than three seconds later, the mouse beaver appeared with two people at once. Both sat at his feet: a corpulent man with a bandaged head and a makeshift splinted leg and a young woman who lacked nothing on the outside except almost any color on her face.

“Wheelchairs!” shouted Gucky. “Broken thigh or weakness with signs of paralysis!”

Two nurses arrived with wheelchairs, hoisted the new arrivals up, and took them through the swinging door into the treatment room. The teleporters had chosen the relatively spacious foyer of the on-board clinic as the starting and finishing point of their jumps. Rhodan and Bull stood close to the wall so as not to get in the way. They had donned Arkonide combat suits but had not yet closed their helmets.

“The mood in the hangar is tense,” said Gucky. “But not quite as you might imagine it. They’re actually continuing with their funny revue! It’s crazy, actually, but if you ask me, whoever started it deserves a medal. And the artists on top of that. To behave like this, in this heat...respect.”

“Listen for a moment,” Rhodan pleaded. “Reg and I will try to get to Hangar C if it’s possible...”

“And justifiable,” interjected Bull, who was not completely convinced of the usefulness of their actions.

“Anyway, can you keep us telepathically in, uh, your mind’s eye, Gucky? So that we can call you if we spontaneously come up with an idea to save everyone?”

“Of course. Over a few hundred meters, that’s a piece of cake for

me. Especially since the dirty thoughts of this red-haired bandit, whom you call your buddy, stand out from the others."

Bull jokingly threatened him with his gloved finger. "Guard your loose mouth. Teeth are easy enough to extract."

The Ilt snorted in playful indignance. Telekinetically, he maneuvered a protective suit. "I'll be away for a short time."

Even the characteristic *plop* sounded brighter and more confident.

In the long, echoing connecting corridors of the ship, nothing indicated the tragedy that was looming in the area of the outer spherical shell. In view of the spotless, seemingly indestructible walls made of Arkon steel, one might have thought that everything was in perfect order.

They trotted side by side. Perry made radio contact with Thora. "New insights?"

"We've got more details on the situation. The positronics gives the time span until the nuclear fire spreads to the transition engine as being twenty-five minutes, plus or minus one minute."

"We've gained time!"

"Insignificant. I cannot and will not wait until the last moment. If the insatiable fire, which is constantly increasing in intensity, were to capture the engine, it would be the end of the *Tosoma*. All that remains for us is to make a distress call, which may attract no response or the wrong one, or it might come too late. This must not happen."

"Is that engine any use at all?" asked Bull.

"Certainly. A repair crew has recalibrated the structure field converter. We can at least take a shorter leap that brings us closer to Arkonide territory, which greatly increases our chances of getting help. It would be foolish not to preserve this possibility."

“All right. What deadline are you giving us, Thora?”

“Five minutes—”

“No!” cried Rhodan and Bull in unison.

“Let me finish. In five minutes, robots will begin attaching explosive charges and installing shield projectors to protect the intact parts of the ship. The blasting of the source of the fire and the enclosed, irretrievably lost areas, including Hangar C, takes place in exactly twenty-two minutes from now. Provided the threat doesn’t escalate.”

Crest joined the radio conversation. “Believe me, it is not easy for us to sacrifice so many people. Nevertheless, reason dictates that this absolutely necessary course of action be planned, come what may.”

“We’ll keep in touch,” Rhodan said dryly.

“One more thing.” Thora took a deep breath. “Your idealism and courage is honorable, but this excursion, from which you do not want to be deterred, seems all the more pointless in light of the current facts. You can’t do anything out there. The fire is eating along the interior walls. Nobody will get through it, not humans, not robots. No individual shield can withstand meter-thick atomic embers.”

“I want to see for myself with my own eyes.”

“This is childish defiance!” Thora had raised her voice; it was a rare occurrence to experience an emotional Arkonide. “You can’t get close enough that you could see more than the optics of our drones.”

“The suits and their shields will protect us from nuclear radiation.”

“Nonsense. The radiation is secondary. What we are dealing with is conflagration, a veritable hellfire!”

“I swear to you, we’ll be careful.”

“You know us,” Bull said faithfully. “Do you think Perry and I are capable of being that stupid?”

“Do I really have to answer that? By the star gods, take care of yourself, Rhodan. I... I don’t want to lose you.” She mumbled the last sentence as if it was hard for her to say it. Rhodan suddenly felt a warm feeling in the middle of his body.

Kakuta handed a protective suit to Rhino, who immediately passed it on for distribution. He was glad that Noritoshi Takase, the sushi master, had taken on the thankless task of determining who received the suits.

Gasping, Kakuta rested his hands on his knees. “Do you know what just happened to me?”

“What?”

“One of the ship’s doctors approached me. In the clinic.” The slender Japanese man spoke raggedly, gasping for air. “Dragged me into an adjoining room under a false pretext. His twin brother is among those trapped. If I bring him out in the next rescue group, he will give me a fortune.”

“An unpleasant case of attempted bribery, reprehensible, but humanly comprehensible. You refused?” *What a question*, Rhino thought self-deprecatingly. *Otherwise, he certainly wouldn’t tell me.*

“Listen up, it gets better. That doctor is not an idiot. He knows as well as you and I that no amount of cash on board this ship can buy much more than everyone gets for free anyway. And that any amount on an Earthly, currently unimaginably distant account is worth nothing here either. That’s why he offered me diamonds.”

“Diamonds?”

“A whole sack full is in his luggage, he admitted to me. Gemstones, he speculates, should also be exchangeable at face value on Arkon. He wants to build a new existence there. However, he would cede part of it to me if I gave preferential treatment to his

brother."

Rhino had to laugh. "I'm from Ukraine, and I served in the Russian Navy. So you don't see me particularly taken aback by your story. This ship truly transports a wealth of human achievements to the Arkonide Empire. Why shouldn't there be a propensity for corruption? Although, frankly, I don't think the Arkonides need Terran development aid for that."

"It disgusts me." As if to emphasize his words, Kakuta opened his helmet and threw it on the hangar floor.

"Are you sure," Rhino asked worriedly, handing the teleporter a towel so he could wipe his mouth, "that you can keep up with this constant jumping for a long time?"

"No. Thank you! No, I'm getting close to the end of my abilities."

Noritoshi Takase led a pale young man with acne to them, who trembled with relief and probably also in anticipation of his first teleportation, like the proverbial aspen leaves. Kakuta groped for his arm, missed it twice, then his fingers clawed tightly and both figures dissolved into nothing.

The accompanying noise was drowned out by drum rolls. On stage, catapult artists performed spectacular combinations of somersaults and screws with admirable élan. Like projectiles, they raced through the air, as if they were briefly above the laws of gravity.

Suddenly, Rhino was overcome by the feeling that he was seeing something very significant. But he could not quite grasp what. While he was still pondering that, Tschubai materialized and staggered into his arms like a wet sack.

13.

The Boulder

Two souls were pounding, alas! in Aescunnar's chest.

Not that the quotation from Goethe's *Faust*, which had involuntarily imposed itself on him, would help him in any way. He was torn between logic and intuition.

Riembau was absolutely right, of course. On the one hand, in the Martian colony, the welfare of the community took precedence over the needs of an individual, especially when that individual acted irrationally and downright suicidal.

On the other hand...

"Great things are happening here," Hetcher had said. Well, not directly, because he did not communicate acoustically, and in this respect one could probably not attribute an undertone to his statement. Nevertheless, Aescunnar had been sure that the short sentence had a deeper meaning.

Slowly, he admonished himself. *One after the other.*

Hetcher was strange, but reliable. He was able to indulge in brilliant descriptions of Mars' potential. He never seemed dissatisfied with the role he played within the small community of Bradbury Base, if he hadn't deliberately chosen this position to begin with.

And then the same Hetcher went out into the sandstorm at night? Just like that? Or, as the commander suspected, out of frustration with life, to kill himself?

Both seemed the same to Aescunnar: wrong. Hetcher, with whom he had gradually and not without temporary setbacks connected with, almost always conveyed that he knew quite well what he was doing. Heavens, he never even went overboard with pranks! It was

always controlled and, when it came down to it, impressively effective. Aescunnar would still be staring at the invading masses of sand at the supply station if Hetcher hadn't been with him.

No. There had to be more to it than craziness or weariness of life.

Even so, his inner voice admonished him rationally, *it would be madness to follow him. This is not a suburb of Yerevan, where the greatest danger comes from drunk motorcyclists. This is Mars!*

While making its undoubtedly well-founded arguments, this voice already knew that it would lose out to Aescunnar's most salient characteristic: curiosity.

As part of his investigation, the historian had meticulously familiarized himself with the local conditions of Bradbury Base. Finally, in order to put a stop to the saboteur's work, he had to find out what possibilities the station offered for inconspicuous activities.

These explorations in every free minute now suited him. There were plenty of sneaky ways to get to one of the airlocks and into the open air unnoticed. Of course, the odd camera would detect his movements, but Idris al-Sharif was hopelessly overwhelmed with his permanent surveillance. And once Aescunnar had snatched a Mars mobile, who should pursue him, since Riembau had issued a directive that further excursions were strictly to be refrained from?

Nobody.

Nobody—exactly. No one would come to his aid. Aescunnar suddenly became aware of how lonely and alone he was in exposing himself to the raging forces of nature as soon as he had left the lock behind him and stood up to the sandstorm. Every gust threatened to tear him off his feet.

He saw nothing. Flowing darkness, rust-orange flurries that put the self-cleaning function of his helmet disc to the test. Although he

had deactivated the outdoor microphones, the whole strange world around him roared and thundered and howled deafeningly. Without his suit's positioning system, he wouldn't even have found his way to the vehicle shelter.

The few seconds in which he kept the entrance open, mind you, still under the protection of the tarpaulin, were enough for dust-fine sand to nest a hand's breadth high on the floor of the vehicle. It crunched under the soles of his shoes, the storm scraping and sanding and rasping against the cabin roof over his head, as intrusively as if it was meant personally.

He launched the Mars mobile and the built-in infrared positioning system. If he could not reach Hetcher's location, he could turn back immediately. There wasn't the slightest chance of finding the Ferron based on eyesight alone. The light cones of the spotlights wrested only frenzied chaos from the blackness: swirling reddish whirlpools that attracted the eye, as if they wanted to suck in and devour the viewer.

But three points of light appeared clearly on the screen. A thick green one stood for Bradbury Base. The purple flashing one, right next to it, symbolized Aescunnar's own vehicle. And the third dot, dark red and also flashing, marked Hetcher's position. The distance was about seventeen kilometers.

Aescunnar instructed the autopilot to set course for the other vehicle and took up pursuit. He radioed Hetcher, but the Ferron did not answer.

A little later, Wei reported from the radio station at Bradbury Base. "Man, Aescunnar, I already had a hunch, but I trusted in your intelligence. Please, don't do this to me! Turn back on the spot while you still can!"

"Sorry. For the time being, I'm making quite good progress. That's why I'm sticking with Hetcher. Should conditions deteriorate, I will heed your instructions; not before."

"Then it may already be too late! The Mars mobiles are robust but by no means up to all the elemental forces that this planet can

unleash on you."

"I'm aware of the risk. Hetcher is worth it to me."

"You know, I was hoping you would be a good influence on him. Instead, his madness seems to have rubbed off on you."

"Maybe."

"By the way, the commander is raging even worse than the sandstorm. You've lost all standing with Louanne. With this stupid action, you're destroying everything you've built up through your exemplary commitment over the past few days."

"That's clear to me too."

"One last time, come back, Aescunnar!"

"I will. With Hetcher."

Wei, who had never lost his composure in Aescunnar's presence, uttered some Chinese words that sounded very much like a curse. He understood *"Da-shiong bao-jah-shr dah la duh-tze."* His translation software, which also stored many terrestrial languages, turned it into *"The explosive thin shit of an elephant!"*

Aescunnar laughed. "Don't bother, my friend. I appreciate you very much, but you can't change my mind. Keep your fingers crossed for me. Aescunnar, out."

Hetcher's vehicle did not move in a straight line away from Bradbury Base, but changed direction again and again. Aescunnar concluded that his roommate had refrained from setting the autopilot to a target. Apparently, he was driving himself, almost as though he were drunk, in serpentine lines.

Why was he doing that? Was he looking for something, and if so, for what? And why now, in the middle of a sandstorm?

Due to the erratic course, which tended to lead Hetcher closer to the right wall of the canyon, the distance between them steadily

decreased. Aescunnar had not lied to Wei; the journey has been surprisingly problem-free so far. Although gusts repeatedly hit the vehicle from all sides, the small mobile fought valiantly against it. For the time being, the worst Aescunnar had to endure was vigorous rattling.

Since there was nothing to see outside but swirling sand, he concentrated entirely on the display. It was almost a meditative exercise. He slipped into a kind of trance. The murderous environment faded out; the world was reduced to a screen and a few symbols. An electronic island in the middle of nowhere. Nirvana...

Finally, the dark red dot stopped flashing. Aescunnar was startled. The dot had stopped flashing!

A humming sound also signaled that Hetcher's vehicle had stopped. He enlarged the relevant section of the map. Hetcher had reached the steep wall, which piled up at this point over five kilometers high. It could not be navigated with the Mars mobile. Did the Ferron want to make a crazy attempt to climb the rock face? Because of the lower gravity, it would not be a completely hopeless undertaking, but still highly dangerous, even without unpredictable gusts of wind.

Although he was now almost bursting with impatience, Aescunnar suppressed the impulse to increase his preset continuous speed. He didn't want to challenge his luck any more.

The minutes passed agonizingly slowly. He would have liked to have passed the time with some kind of activity; for example, by practicing further "vocabulary" from the Ferron sign language. But he could not be distracted; he had to stay alert and awake, as much as it strained him.

Maybe he should sing...

He remembered an anecdote that an old acquaintance had told him. That acquaintance had been made long before the turn of the millennium, at a car stop in Europe while on the road with a friend. They had wanted to get from Thessaloniki to Salzburg. A Turkish

truck driver had taken the two on the condition that they reliably made sure he did not fall asleep at the wheel, because he was already very tired. To that end, he had loudly sung Turkish folk songs. Whenever the singing stopped, the hitchhiker who was on “guard duty” nudged the driver.

The story ended well. They had arrived safely in Salzburg, albeit with rather shaky knees.

The two luminous dots on his display overlapped almost completely when the spotlight cones caught the rock face, and finally, about twenty meters in front of it, Hetcher’s vehicle. As feared, the transparent cabin was empty.

Aescunnar rounded the abandoned Mars mobile several times, in vain. Hetcher was nowhere to be seen. Visibility had improved a little, which was probably due to the protection of the rock face. Or was he now in the eye of the storm?

The historian hesitated. The temptation was great to linger in the relative safety of the vehicle, possibly take a short nap, and wait for his companion’s return. But what if Hetcher didn’t come back to his vehicle? Either because he didn’t want to or because he was no longer able to do so? Aescunnar would have regretted it until the end of his life.

It was no use. He had come this far; he had to go through with it.

As soon as he got out, the howling of the storm hit him like a brick. He soon found the reason the wind noise here was so much louder. The steep wall, which towered far higher than his gaze could reach, was cut by a slightly oblique crack, about three meters wide and at least as deep. Through this chimney, the storm whistled, producing sounds that sometimes sounded like the cries of all sorts of animals, sometimes frightening like the crying of small children.

At the foot of the crevice lay a jagged stone block about five meters high. It closed the gap almost completely. He moved ahead, not without looking up suspiciously again and again. Mountains

plus storm equaled rockfall—he had learned this equation not only in the French Maritime Alps. And lower gravity produced less weight, but notoriously no less mass.

Hetcher had to know that too, but he obviously hadn't paid attention. Half buried under sand, rocks, and up-to-fist-sized stones, the Ferron lay between the boulder and the entrance to the chimney.

Motionless. Dead?

As quickly as he could, with all due caution, Aescunnar cleared away the rubble. Strangely, Hetcher's arms were wrapped around a bulge in the rock, as if he had wanted to touch it or hold on to it. But that was beside the point. Aescunnar checked his helmet and suit. Fortunately, he could not detect any cracks or holes, nor did he find any signs of external injuries. Hetcher's eyelids were closed; whether he was breathing could not be determined through the dirty helmet.

Aescunnar shouldered the limp body and carried it to the Mars mobiles. He thought about how to proceed. Both vehicles had a first aid module. But the one Hetcher had come with may have adapted better to Ferron needs. So he loaded him onto one of the seats and connected the suit's socket to the diagnostic unit via a cable that was used for both data and, if necessary, energy transmission.

A little later, he received information that the suit's life support systems were working. However, the oxygen supply had short dropouts. The unit, which was housed in the flat backpack, may have been damaged by the rockfall.

There was also a connection for such cases. Aescunnar installed a hose from the helmet collar to the emergency reserve of the Mars mobile. It would hopefully enough to keep Hetcher breathing undisturbed until they arrived at Bradbury Base.

The Ferron was unconscious, if not comatose. According to the limited medical judgment of the first aid module, however, he was not in acute mortal danger. Whether he had suffered internal injuries could not be assessed with the available means.

So far, okay. After all, it could have been worse.

Aescunnar went to his own vehicle and programmed the autopilot to access it wirelessly from the other. Hetcher himself had shown the human how to do that...

“I know you can’t hear me,” Aescunnar said after the two mobiles were moving towards Bradbury Base. “At the moment, less than ever. But let me tell you that I’m glad to have found you. And we’ll find out what drove you to come here, of all places.”

14.

The Wall

Rhodan and Bull stood in front of a wall of fire. Hangar C was only a few meters behind it and was still inaccessible.

“This is the thinnest spot?” asked Rhodan.

Thora’s voice answered in the affirmative. “But it makes no difference how thick the ember barrier is. It cannot be removed.”

“Special robots?” asked Bull.

“They’d burn up in seconds. We have already discussed this. Come back to the bridge.”

“Tractor beams. To pull that damned stuff apart.”

“The projectors sit in the ring bulge and are directed outwards. Their function, as you know, is mainly to bring loads on board.”

“Or chefs... Could we remove a projector and install it here?”

“First of all, there is no longer enough time, and secondly, the beams cannot be adjusted in any complex way. A hole could be created, but this would also perforate the hangar wall, which is currently still preventing the spread. A devastating torrent of fire would pour into Hangar C.” Thora sounded nervous. “Believe it or not, I’ve already come up with this idea. Unfortunately, it doesn’t work. Forget it.”

Bull clenched his hands into fists and beat them against each other several times. “Then I’m at my wit’s end,” he admitted.

“But gentlemen,” came a shrill beep voice behind them, “who would think about giving up when he has the savior of the universe on board?”

“That went quickly,” said Rhodan.

“Huh? Did I miss something?” asked Bull.

“Unlike you, Redhead, I can read minds,” said Gucky. “Yours are corrosive, but Perry’s… Respect.”

“What are you thinking, little one?”

“Phew. Difficult. Could work. But after that, I’m guaranteed to be useless for a while.”

“Will someone tell me what this is all about?”

“Your suggestion with the tractor beams made me think of it,” Rhodan explained. “Gucky’s telekinesis is basically the same thing. But he can use it in a much more variable and fine-tuned manner.”

“That’s what I mean,” chirped the mouse beaver. “Especially in several directions at the same time, and that’s what matters here.”

Bull understood. “You want the wonder rat to drive a telekinetic tunnel through the wall?”

“You’re lucky to not already be glued to the ceiling for that comment,“ Gucky said shrilly. “If I didn’t have to save my strength... But yes, it should be possible to create a passage and at the same time seal it so that the fire does not spread into the hangar. I’ve never done anything like this, not with a nuclear fire, but there’s a first time for everything, no?”

“The tunnel has to be big enough to fit a person in a spacesuit that a second person is clinging to,” Perry said aloud, although he had already telepathically conveyed as much to the Ilt. “The individual force shield should protect both for a few seconds of passage. Gucky?”

“I’m in. Not everyone can write that in their biography to have outsmarted an Arkon bomb.”

“Would it help you if Wuriu formed a parapsychic bloc with you?” interjected Bull.

“Little to not at all, I think. There is not much for him to spy on; I have to feel the burning hot stuff myself anyway. And nothing against his abilities, but what he would contribute in terms of psi-energy, I’ll have used up beforehand with the additional teleportation to get him here.”

“End of discussion,” Rhodan decided. “We’ll give it a try. Let’s go!”

With dogged tension, Rhino followed the performances on stage. Kutschker’s ensemble had long since extended the encore far beyond the planned level. The conferencier, a somewhat greasy Swiss named Bernie Biegler, had just announced another “absolutely sensational, unprecedented trapeze act.”

Rhino only barely managed to be distracted by this and not think about the seriousness of the situation. In addition, he was still plagued by a nagging feeling of not understanding what his subconscious wanted to tell him. Again and again, the premonition of an idea came to the surface. But every time he was close to catching it, something happened that pulled him out of his concentration.

In any case, it was not the hackneyed jokes of the conferencier that gave him this diffuse association. Rather, it was the artists.

Catapult…trapezoid…flying people…

He flinched as he heard a beep on his hip. The radio that one of the teleporters—he wasn’t sure which one—had turned on. He took it off his belt. His palm was so soaked in sweat that it almost slipped away from him.

On the line was Perry Rhodan himself. Rhino, increasingly fascinated, listened to his explanations.

“That, that would be…great,” he stammered. “It’s the answer! I can’t express how relieved I am…”

“Nothing has been accomplished yet.” Rhodan brought him back

down to earth.

"I'll do everything right away. Man, please tell the little fellow, if he can do it, I'll cook him a twenty-four-course meal with carrots all, each dish better than the last."

"Will do. Let us know when you're ready on your side."

"Aye, sir!" said Rhino.

He didn't mean it ironically at all.

Gucky was posed like a gunslinger in a duel, except that his hands were pointed forward with his fingers spread, in the direction of the ember wall. Rhodan and Bull flanked him. They had synchronized the positronics of their combat suits in order to be able to set up a common energy shield immediately, if necessary.

The Ilt closed his eyes. After a few breaths, he said loudly, "Man, this stuff is disgusting. I can't feel anything about the temperature, but the consistency is...gross! Slippery, darn hard to control because everything is so inhomogeneous and reacts so erratically... I have to be extremely careful that nothing gets away from me..." The inner tension in his voice was obvious.

Rhino reported that he was ready. A number of pairs of suit-wearers and unprotected persons had taken up position in the hangar. Gucky, who had overheard, groaned softly. As if by magic, a funnel-shaped indentation formed in the wall. At first, it was only palm-sized, but it grew rapidly.

As the dent expanded into a tube, parts of the crushed metal burned up, causing miniature explosions. Rhodan speculated that these were visible symptoms of the additional complications Gucky had been talking about: the material he formed telekinetically was highly unstable. Creating the tunnel took a lot of energy.

"Every pair shall...one by one...," gasped the Ilt. "Always at my command. Must decide every time...if I can answer for it."

"Understood." Rhodan passed the instruction on to Rhino.

The telekinetic propulsion broke through the hangar wall. Through the tunnel, which now measured about two and a half meters, Perry saw in gloomy red light a row of two, the top of which kept a safe distance of about ten meters to the wall.

“The first pair...go!” ordered Gucky.

Two came out. Then two more and two more. The musicians accompanied each successful passage with a whisper.

The next two... Rhino was not superstitious. Nevertheless, he did not allow himself to join in the cheers of the crowd. For the time being, the telekinetically created rescue tunnel held. Although Gucky took short breaks in between, the evacuation proceeded much faster than before by teleportation. But the queue was still so long...

Again, two...

And then the procedure stalled.

Ten, twenty, thirty seconds passed, but nothing more came from Gucky.

Then a shout. “Away from the wall! Can’t hold it. I’m sorry...”

They took the warning seriously and fled back to the middle of the hangar. Not a second too soon. The tunnel opening collapsed at the same time that an entire section of the wall several meters wide and high did the same. Behind it, a sea of embers became visible.

The inferno flooded over the trapped passengers.

Rhodan and Bull had to watch helplessly as Gucky, the tunnel, and finally the entire wall fell apart in quick succession. The gap was filled with scorching embers, which now flowed lazily into the corridor. The combined protective shield was promptly erected.

“Run,” Rhodan shouted to the ten escapees from the hangar, whom he and Bull had immediately waved on into the ship. “Run!”

They obeyed. Rhodan and Bull followed them, dragging Gucky between them, to the next fire compartment. They did not need to operate the mechanism; it closed as soon as they were through. Thora had apparently been following events as they unfolded from the bridge.

"Thank you," Rhodan radioed. "Did our failed attempt make matters worse?"

"No. The entire area had to be abandoned anyway. Make sure you keep going. You are still on the wrong side of explosive charges and shield projectors!"

They quickly withdrew from the danger zone. Gucky had lost consciousness. His whole slender body trembled and he was foaming at the mouth as he whimpered in agony.

"It was too much for him," said Bull. "He's not to blame. He couldn't know that half the wall was about to collapse. But he still managed to rescue a few more people."

Rhodan was silent. Gucky had been able to save ten other people. Ten out of still over five hundred, who were now doomed to death. It just wasn't fair. They had tried everything and failed. Soon, Thora would press a holographic button at the command post in the main control center and trigger the blast coordinated by the positronics.

Bull, now carrying Gucky in his arms like a feverish child, said quietly, "There's nothing more we can do, old man. Even if it hurts like hell, we have to accept this defeat. It's over."

15.

Unconscious

The sandstorm had subsided a little. However, there was still no question of normal visibility. Aescunnar remained dependent on the radio's finding and positioning system.

In his mind, he apologized for every single time he had cursed Louanne Riembau's incessant drills. Now, it paid off that all Mars mobiles at the station had been serviced, "refueled," and functionally checked daily. In both his and Hetcher's vehicles, the bar that showed the charge level of the fuel cells in the display was still reassuringly long.

The same distance, this time back to Bradbury Base, seemed to him far harder and much longer than in the opposite direction. On the way out, excitement had kept him awake. But now he lacked the incentive of the chase, the journey into the unknown, and the adrenaline had long since dissipated.

He felt fatigue in all his bones and didn't know what to do about it. Once again, he was condemned to passivity and had to trust the autopilot of his vehicle more or less blindly. He could not even monitor the Ferron's vitals; he was forced to leave that to the bubble's med unit as well. It would sound the alarm if Hetcher's condition deteriorated dramatically.

And then? What then?

Aescunnar drifted away into a land between dreams and waking. This land was populated by Martians. They danced around the thin, vulnerable domed vehicle, which rocked him gently, through the storm, through the night; and at the same time they circled the purple flashing dot, which crept towards the green blob so infinitely slowly that one hardly noticed a change.

Characters from all sorts of stories he had told Hetcher met on the screen, as well as in the orange dust outside, impaled by the

spotlights, always the same and yet always fascinating, hypnotizing, even. Teenya, the Martian princess, was lounging on the transparent window, wanting to ensnare him to display him in her zoo: "*Earthling in its natural habitat…"*

A humanoid male figure with a short-cropped beard, a psychiatrist, told him that he was not real, but only the incarnate hallucination of a madman and therefore had to be terminated...

A ridiculously pseudo-futuristically dressed child named Gimar—which was an abbreviation of Girl Martian, as if there was only one on the whole Red Planet, played by the then eight-year-old Pia Zadora—this poor girl begged him to stay with him as Santa Claus...

Abstruse creatures with the voices of sirens called him alternately *Barsoom* and *Tarzan* or *Edgar*, encircled him with sweetish appendages; smacking and sucking as they pulled and tugged at him, not allowing him his well-deserved rest...

"Aescunnar! Cyr! Cyr, by Mao's limping hairdresser, answer me!"

Startled, he shouted syllables that not even he himself understood. Then, Aescunnar finally found himself and the intercom button. "Sorry, I was briefly... What's up?"

Wei's sigh of relief drowned out the crackling and rasping of the sandstorm. "Here is Bradbury Base. You don't have far to go, Cyr. I just wanted to make sure there wasn't a ghost ship heading towards us. Are you okay?"

"Okay feels different, if my humble experience doesn't deceive me, but...yes, I am relatively well. And I have Hetcher with me."

"In what condition?"

"You should keep the ward doctors on standby, I think. Both of them."

"Will do."

A fierce female voice intervened. "Don't think this stunt of yours makes you a hero, Aescunnar. The opposite is true. As soon as

you're back on your feet, there will be disciplinary proceedings!"

"I love you too, Louanne..."

The green dome of Bradbury Base appeared out of the sand flurry a few hundred meters ahead, disappearing intermittently behind reddish streaks of sand.

Aescunnar didn't have the slightest desire to properly park and resupply the two Mars mobiles, especially since the locating beacons overlapped and therefore no one in the station knew that he had also recovered Hetcher's vehicle. Since further outings were forbidden anyway as long as the sandstorm raged, he parked the second vehicle in a ditch by remote control. He would take care of it after he got some rest, hopefully soon.

Three figures in space suits approached him as he, shouldered by Hetcher's lifeless body, staggered out of the Mars mobile shelter towards the main airlock. Only at close range did he recognize the commander, the sheriff, and the doctor, Emily Tempsky. They took Hetcher from him.

Then everything went dark.

Aescunnar woke up because someone smelled very pleasant. It couldn't be him. "How is Hetcher?" was his first thought, which he said out loud.

"Our attempts to awaken him have not yet been successful," said the refreshingly perfumed person who turned out to be Tempsky. "My colleague and I suspect that is due to the lack of oxygen he suffered. Unfortunately, we don't know more. The infirmary is based on Earthl technology. In the case of Ferrons, a diagnosis is more a guessing game."

"But you have spittoons," Cyr laughed.

"They are much easier to obtain."

"Can I visit him?"

“If you really want to. You are highly exhausted, completely drained; surely you won’t deny that. Basically, however, you’re in good health. I have already given you dietary supplements. So hold hands with your crazy buddy for a moment. But then quickly get back to your quarters to rest before the commander assigns you to latrine duty today. Understood?”

Aescunnar nodded, his surroundings blurring before his eyes. He lifted himself up, slid off the bunk bed, and noticed that he was wearing nothing but underpants that were much too wide around his thighs. He pulled them jerkily over his navel, found that he had nothing to be ashamed of seeing as Mars was quite far away from the nearest fancy gala, and walked a few steps to the hospital bed in which Hetcher lay.

As the New Zealand doctor who had followed him suggested, he took Hetcher’s hand. It was cold. Very cold. This was cause for concern because, as Aescunnar thought he knew, Ferrons were generally adept to a warmer climate than Earth’s.

Wait, Cyr thought. *Semantic error. Shouldn’t their metabolism be affected precisely because of this?*

Whatever conclusion this consideration would have led to, it slipped away from him. He hadn’t seen through all this for a long time. At the back of his head hammered a woodpecker; his thoughts swirled in his mind.

“By God, go to sleep,” Tempsky said. “You won’t help your roommate if you also collapse. You’ve already done anything you could, and quite brilliantly at that.”

The woman was so right. In general, she was one of the most enjoyable personalities in this miserable bunker. “Will you inform me if he…”

“Of course.”

Aescunnar nodded gratefully, tapped his temple, summing up his remaining energy so that he could take the few steps out of the med department with some dignity, when Hetcher suddenly sat up.

The Ferron writhed, twitching in convulsions. His arms whipped the air as if beyond control. His fingers bent, cramped. He nearly fell out of bed.

Doctor Tempsky was on the spot, demonstrating routine and calm expertise. While she threw herself over the Ferron to hold him down, she called for her colleague, the second ward doctor. He appeared immediately, wrapped straps around Hetcher's arms and legs, and listened to him with a stethoscope.

"Vitals are okay," he said. "If you ask me, he's having bad dreams and violent flatulence at the same time."

Tempsky went to a cabinet, opened the glass doors and took out an ampoule. "The Ferron miracle drug," she said over her shoulder to Aescunnar. "A tea extract left to me by my Ferron doctor's colleague. This should stabilize your friend and put him out of action for the next few hours. You can safely return to your cabin. Hetcher is in good hands."

"I have no doubts," said Aescunnar. "Good night or good day, whatever it is now."

"Sleep well!"

"Thank you!" He took his protective suit off the hook, put it over his arm and closed the door from the outside.

The way down the stairs to his and Hetcher's quarters seemed infinitely far to him. Much farther than from Bradbury Base to the rock in front of the entrance to the fireplace in the canyon wall, which a whim of nature had shaped like the paw of a lizard...

He leaned on a shelf protruding from a niche. Data carriers tipped over, creating a classic domino effect. One cassette pushed the next and so on. He was far too weak to catch the containers sliding over the edge and tumbling to the ground.

One thing led to another. That's how it's always been in life.

A, then B, then C...

Lightning shot down his spine, so hot and bright that it set him up straight as a candle. He, who had refused any military service all his life, almost saluted.

Mosaic pieces fell into place as a matter of course, one after the other. Suddenly, everything made sense.

Aescunnar cursed the intellect that left him no choice. He took a deep breath, then put on his spacesuit and went back to the infirmary.

“Wrong direction,” said Tempsky, frowning. “Can you find your way into your bed alone? Or shall I send a nurse to assist you?”

“We need to talk.”

“Sure. Tomorrow or as soon as an opportunity arises...”

“No. Now.”

He was very glad that she was not one of those who could kill with looks.

16.

One Quarter, Three Quarters

The deadly fire licked after the far too many people crowded around the outside of the hangar, close to each other, in front of the recently closed bulkhead.

Franz Ferdinand Kutschker oscillated emotionally between total despair and the exhilaration of participating in a decisive moment in human history. The greatest tragedy in the history of young human space travel: the *Titanic* of the twenty-first century! His greatest concern was that most likely no one would survive who could adequately appreciate his prominent role. It was always the same with journalists and writers: if you needed them, they weren't there.

If, on the other hand, you rehearsed the play of a living author, he would constantly swarm around during rehearsals and talk everywhere in the erroneous assumption that just because he had written the text, he knew better than the director what he had meant by it. If the play and the author were good, one did not want to spoil it with him, so one could not simply ban him from the building. Most of the time, he could be distracted by being fed potential sexual objects according to his particular preference. Some workers were hired almost exclusively for this purpose. Nevertheless, as a director, you wasted a lot of time with writers.

As far as cultural journalists were concerned, they were generally the even greater evil. Kutschker had already noted down some harsh formulations, which he had written in his autobiography...

Oh!

Nothing would come of that either. He was not one of the few who had gotten hold of a space suit. Apart from those who had volunteered as porters through the fire tunnel, preference had been given to people suffering from shortness of breath and suffocation. Neither fit nor battered enough, Kutschker had fallen between those

two parameters.

However, he did not find it worth the trouble to question the criteria according to which Rhino's cooks distributed the suits. Although he still considered himself the most important person on board, he strongly doubted that Rhino shared his view. In addition, he did not believe that a suit significantly increased his chances of survival. Nothing could cope with this kind of fire. At most, a protective suit unnecessarily prolonged the torment of the victim.

Kutschker looked at the embers of hell, which were slowly inching closer, as if they were playing with the doomed, and thought, *Impressive, but still far too few, additional alien effects; very badly staged.*

Thora would have preferred not to conduct this radio conversation. But such things were part of the duties of a ship commander.

The call was answered immediately.

"Rhino here. The telekinetic escape tunnel idea started well, but it didn't work out, did it?"

"Unfortunately, you are right. The attempt failed because Gucky could no longer withstand the strain, and therefore no further attempt will take place. We tried everything, but in vain. There is no way to save all those trapped. Only one thing can and must be done."

"I'm listening." The voice of the cook, who had acted so bravely, sounded occupied. He seemed to suspect what was to follow.

"In my capacity as commander, I call on spacesuit wearers to get to safety immediately before the nuclear fire-infested hangar region is blown off."

"But...they cannot overcome the embers. The individual shields are not strong enough."

Thora was almost certain that Rhino had already understood but

wanted her to say it. Wanted the terrible news to come out of her mouth.

“That’s right. They have to flee through space.”

“Which is only possible if we open the hangar airlock again.”

“Yes.”

“For everyone else, that means death by suffocation.” It was not a protest, but a statement.

“Yes.” Thora cleared her throat. “The rest are lost either way. Why should more people die than necessary? Those who can save themselves must save themselves, and within the next minute. Ugolyev, this is not a suggestion, but an order. Did you understand me?”

“Yes.”

“Then carry out my command.”

“I will.” He sounded bent; who wouldn’t in his situation?

“One more thing.” Thora owed this to him, for several reasons. “Did you get a suit yourself, Rhino?”

“No, I don’t have one. You will have to add my name to the list of the fallen.”

“I am truly sorry. Especially since you would have been spared this fate if I had not brought you on board at the last second.”

“Well, tough luck. Farewell, Thora da Zoltral.”

“We will honor your memory, Rinat Ugolyev.”

She had been as cool as always and she was right. Thora’s logic was flawless; Rhino couldn’t find any error in it.

Almost a quarter of those trapped had a spacesuit and thus a real

chance of survival if they took the detour “outside” across free space and got out of the danger zone in time before the demolition took place. The emphasis was *on time*. Rhino was no longer allowed to procrastinate. He had to set them in motion, open the hangar airlock and condemn the remaining three-quarters, including himself, to die perhaps a minute or two earlier.

The countdown was on. He had to act and pass on Thora da Zoltral’s command. But everything in him resisted. Had he survived the wreck of the *Svyatitel Nikolay* in order to suffocate miserably on a much larger vessel? Project 955A of the Borey class was the most modern nuclear-powered underwater cruiser of the Russian fleet, a proud 170 meters long and 13.5 meters wide. Nevertheless, hundreds—no, thousands of such submarines could have been accommodated purely in terms of volume within the *Tosoma*. The spherical ship may have been over ten thousand years old, but the technology built into it was still unimaginably far ahead of anything Earthly. And it was impossible to do what the crew of the *Svyatitel Nikolay* had succeeded in?

The disaster in the North Sea…the trapeze artists…diving people, flying people…

He was so close, so close… What had Thora said? He would have been spared if she hadn’t caught him at the last second…

Suddenly, it clicked.

He frantically pressed the call button of the mini radio. “Thora! Thora, are you still here? I now know how we can save ourselves. Perhaps. Thora, can you hear me?”

“I hear you. Rhino, with all due respect to your will to live, please accept that we are running out of time.” Thora nodded to Rhodan and Bull, who had returned to headquarters. Both raised their eyebrows questioningly. “I’ll give you thirty seconds for your last words,” she said into the wireless microphone.

“Good. Order half a dozen combat robots from the outside to the hangar. It’s fast, isn’t it? The robots shoot open the airlock bulkhead

so that the air escapes abruptly and pulls everyone outside with it, whether in suits or evening dresses."

"I don't understand..."

"In its hour of greatest need, the human organism is capable of incredible achievements. I have experienced this firsthand. We had to leave a grounded submarine through the emergency hatch, one by one, without oxygen equipment, to reach the surface of the sea, dozens of meters overhead. We had no choice. It was much too far. We should not have survived but all but two men got through."

"There's no water out there; it's open space, an almost perfect vacuum."

"Even higher beings like humans can resist for a short time!" interjected Bull excitedly. "Man has the solution, of course! How could we be so blind!" He slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand, making a clapping sound. "Before all the technical and parapsychic hocus-pocus, we didn't see the obvious. A cook had to come..."

"Rhino." Thora soothed the red-haired bolt of energy. "The defenseless would take far too long to get back on the ship elsewhere..." She fell silent because she had just recognized the answer herself.

"You'll pull us with tractor beams to the ship and into it," said Rhino. "As you did before with me at the *Tosoma's* launch."

"That was just one person. We're talking about a few hundred people!"

"We'll help you," said Rhodan. His eyes flashed so much that Thora knew that resistance was futile.

17.

Revealing

“You are confused, good man,” said Doctor Tempsky gently. “The whole thing was too much for you. You don’t have to be embarrassed about that; it’s only natural after everything you’ve been through.”

“Don’t worry about me!” demanded Aescunnar. “I’m thinking perfectly clearly.”

“Says you. We humans are extremely gifted in the art of self-deception. Did you know that ninety-five percent of all patients in psychiatric hospitals have no realization that they’re sick?”

“Are you saying I’m insane?”

“No, but completely exhausted, and you suffer from sleep deprivation. Come, sit down. I’ll give you a remedy that will calm your overstimulated nerves, and in a few minutes everything will be fine.” Without taking her eyes off Aescunnar, the doctor reached into the medicine cabinet behind her and pulled out a high-pressure syringe.

“Earlier you said that was Ferron wonder medicine, supposedly a tea extract.”

“Which was also true. This is the same for humans. Same cupboard, different drawer.” She showed him the syringe with her arm outstretched and approached him. “Catapresan. A clonidine supplement. a Aild sedative that is also used to treat withdrawal symptoms and hyperactivity. Just the right thing for someone who had a night drive in the Martian sandstorm and can’t find any rest despite extreme fatigue. The scientific term, if you want to know, is alpha-2-adrenoceptor agonist.”

“I don’t care. Keep that away from me!”

Their eyes met. Aescunnar saw that Tempsky was considering whether she should pounce on him, overpower him, and give him the drug against his will. There was no one in the room except the two of them, and she was a strong-built woman, almost as tall as he was and in far better physical condition at the moment. But she couldn't be sure that he wouldn't resist. And how could she subsequently justify the attack, which was a clear overstepping of her authority?

She stopped at a distance of two meters away. "You're quite stubborn," said the blonde soothingly. "All right, out with it! What's so urgent that it can't wait until you've slept?"

"The saboteur."

"What saboteur?"

"The real cause of the many small and large technical problems and human errors. You're behind that, Emily. The saboteur, the ghost haunting Bradbury Base: it's you."

She laughed loudly. "Gracious God, Aescunnar, you are hallucinating. Catapresan will also help with that."

"I have evidence."

Tempsky rolled his eyes. "Please, make it short. I've had a long shift."

Where to start? As a lover of popular culture, Aescunnar sensed that this was the moment when Sherlock Holmes and each of his numerous spiritual descendants would have folded their hands behind their backs and begun to pace the room with long strides. But he lacked the energy for that. "Your name is Tempsky," he said, "and you're from New Zealand."

"What is this? An interrogation?"

"Does your family go back to Gustav von Tempsky? The Prussian adventurer who traveled half of Latin America before settling down on New Zealand's South Island?"

“That’s right. But I don’t see what the significance—”

“Your ancestor came from an old Pomeranian noble family. As an eighteen-year-old ensign, he moved to the Mosquito Coast in Honduras. Later, after stints as a prospector in California and Australia, he worked as a newspaper correspondent in your home country. Soon, he not only wanted to write about the Maori wars, but was paid by the settlers as a mercenary and fought as a British major in a company of the Forest Rangers against the natives, where he eventually fell in battle.”

“Get to it, man.”

“I got it all from the station media library, where, according to the records there, you also frequently, both personally and via the intranet, obtain specialist literature from all sorts of areas that have virtually nothing to do with medicine.”

“So what? I use my free time to educate myself. That’s not prohibited, but on the contrary expressly desired by station management.”

Aescunnar noticed that he was losing the discussion. Maybe he should have calmly arranged his thoughts beforehand. “Your interest in some very specific details of engineering is at least strange.”

“That’s ridiculous, and you know it as well as I do. Why shouldn’t I acquire additional knowledge about Bradbury Base’s most pressing problem areas?”

“Forklifts? Fertilizer?”

“Everything that can make someone sick. I’m a doctor.”

“Smart answer. On the other hand, you don’t discuss it with anyone. All my interviewees so far agree that you stay away from social events.”

“I don’t have to go to cabin parties. All members of the staff come to me anyway for regular health checks. Let’s break off this charade; it’s not leading us anywhere. I didn’t steal my time. Put

your cards on the table or apologize for your far-fetched accusations. And then go back to your quarters."

"Okay. Smetana, the chief radio operator, told me that all the people at the station occasionally send messages to their relatives on Earth. With one exception: Emily Tempsky. Do you have absolutely no one to tell, at least from time to time, how you're doing here on Mars?"

"I... I'm estranged with my family."

"The address book for the Otago district lists fifty-two Tempskys who derive their names from the same Gustavus Ferdinand of East Prussia. You're telling me that you fell out with all these relatives?"

"If that is the essence of your reasoning, Aescunnar, then good night."

She was tough. She had briefly shown a hint of uncertainty but had already regained her composure. With her hands on her wide hips, she looked at him mockingly. He had to pull his only trump card out of his sleeve.

"Speaking of radio... Your attack was almost perfect. But only almost. I wouldn't have thought of it if you hadn't given me the cue yourself."

Tempsky yawned ostentatiously.

"The key term is 'dietary supplements.'" He waited for a reaction, but the doctor maintained her poker face. "You said you gave me supplements after I brought Hetcher back and briefly drifted off."

"As I routinely do with everyone who has been out in the field. To prevent deficiency symptoms."

"Yes. Exactly. Routinely. Nevertheless, you sent out a radio message to remind all the outside teams to take their supplements."

"These are scientists, Aescunnar. Sometimes you have to fear that they will forget to breathe just because a brilliant thought has

occurred to them."

"I have the radio logs from both Bradbury Base and the supply station, whose access mechanism was sabotaged and which Hetcher and I painstakingly cleared of sand."

"An honorable feat. I will nominate you both for a medal. A golden shovel on a silver vacuum cleaner hose."

"Sarcasm does not become you. As I said, you yourself mentioned the dietary supplements and thereby gave away the evidence that proves your guilt. Doctor Tempsky, I must confess that I would have missed it entirely without this. In the records of the supply station, it is documented—the message you sent to the vastness of Mars. Your justification at first glance seemed inconspicuous, but at second glance appeared rather flimsy. Furthermore, that transmission contained a file. A file sent along without special identifiers. One would think that it was simply the identifier of the Medical Department. In Smetana's log, however, there is no trace of it. There is only one explanation: someone must have deleted it from the records afterwards. But who?"

"Baseless insinuations. Why would I have done that?"

"Because it was a program that would run upon receipt? And fooling the locks of the supply station into believing that someone had opened the door? And because this program could no longer have been reconstructed by the recipients, but could have been reconstructed by the sender?"

He saw the attack coming, had been expecting it for some time. Nevertheless, Aescunnar's reflexes were so pitifully dulled that he plopped aside as if in slow motion and escaped the anesthetic injection by a hair's breadth.

Tempsky pushed back; Aescunnar fended her off with his forearm. The protective suit further hindered him, but it was also his salvation.

"My video and sound recording systems are running," he croaked, even though she had wrapped her arm around his neck

and pressed so hard against the resistance of the helmet brace that he threatened to lose his breath. “They have been all along. And they’re broadcasting live. Both to Smetana and to the sheriff. It’s over, Emily. With this attack, you have given yourself away. And confirmed my admittedly shaky theory.”

The stranglehold loosened.

“You have no proof,” hissed the doctor.

“You went for my throat. I think that will be enough.”

18.

Fishing People

Rhodan, Bull, and Thora stood side by side at the command podium on the *Tosoma*. In front of each of them hovered a holographic element that was used to control a group of tractor beams.

“The combat robots have moved into position in front of Hangar C,” Thora said tensely. “The airlocks of the nearest hangar are open. There, robots, and technical and medical teams are ready to provide intensive care to those rescued from space as quickly as possible.”

Bull crossed his fingers and cracked them. Thora gave him a quick glance and continued

“Rhino instructed the people in the hangar as far as the time available allowed. They now know roughly where the thresholds are.”

“Whether they believe in it is another matter,” Rhodan said.

The myth was still widespread that people exposed to a vacuum would explode or freeze to death on the spot and at the same time be boiled inside. None of this was the case, at least not immediately. Although it was extremely cold in space, the body cooled down quite slowly due to the lack of a heat conductor, as it lost almost only thermal radiation. There was no immediate state of shock, which kept the blood pressure above the vapor pressure of water at 37 degrees Celsius. And as long as this was ensured, the blood wouldn’t begin to boil. However, the saliva on the tongue could become boiling hot. After about ten seconds, the skin and underlying tissue swelled. But you still didn’t have to be afraid of exploding.

The extreme skydiver Joe Kittinger, one of Bull’s declared idols, took a balloon in 1960 to an altitude of over 31 kilometers and dealt with pressure loss in his left glove. The hand hurt, becoming

numb and useless, but when Kittinger, who nevertheless carried out his stunt to the end, reached deeper regions again as part of his record jump, the condition of the affected hand normalized, and afterwards no damage remained. Human skin and tissue were therefore quite capable of withstanding a pressure difference of one bar for some time, just as relatively thin steel tanks trapped compressed oxygen, the pressure of which was hundreds of times the ambient air.

After about fifteen seconds, as a not entirely intentional experiment of NASA had also shown in the sixties of the last century, one lost consciousness in a vacuum. This was roughly equivalent to the time it took for the no-longer-oxygenated blood to travel from the lungs to the brain. Then it became critical. The damage increased and multiplied. After thirty seconds at the latest, the last person should have been fished out of space. When death definitely occurred, there was disagreement among scientists. Some tended towards one minute, others closer to two or even three. For obvious reasons, there was almost no experimental data.

Rhodan, Bull, and Thora each had to rescue about a hundred and twenty-five unprotected people in less than half a minute. That was two- to three-tenths of a second per person, or three seconds per group of twelve...but you couldn't count like that. They had to try to transport the passengers in groups as large as possible, all at once and, on the other hand, distribute them as evenly as possible in the hangar so that there were no traffic jams. Responsiveness was required, and they would probably need a considerable portion of luck in addition to positronic support.

Unfortunately, they only had this one attempt...

"Ready?" asked Thora.

Rhino and his fellow passengers had lined up in Hangar C, as far away from the airlock bulkhead as the hellish embers on the opposite side allowed. The last row consisted of the wearers of the space suits. First, they were less affected by the heat. Secondly, by holding each other's hands, they formed a chain designed to prevent any of those standing in front of them from accidentally

being left behind in the hangar. As soon as they were outside, they would loosen their grips and try to gain distance, Thora had ordered, or otherwise behave completely passively. After all, they were the least threatened by danger.

On the other hand, they had not mastered the control of the suits well enough to decisively support the rescue mission. It was better that they did not cause additional complications at the very least.

“All right, guys!” cried Rhino. “We’re about to deliver a stunt that no one will be quick to copy. Don’t forget: don’t hold your breath! That’s the most important thing; otherwise, you’ll damage your lungs.” He had already told them three times that it was the same as with ascending scuba divers, but he couldn’t say it often enough. “When I give the signal, we will all blow out together. The next breath we’ll take will be back in safety. Good luck, guys!”

“Are you ready, Rhino?” radioed Thora.

“Yes. Give the order to fire. And now everyone: pfff...”

“Fire!”

Large parts of the airlock burst. As if in slow motion, pieces of debris trudged towards the people standing close, slowed down, stood still for a moment, and whizzed back along with the huge pull that gripped Rhino and the others and tore them outside so rapidly that he almost lost sight and hearing.

Now, he really could do nothing more than count the seconds in his head. His life was in his hands, or more precisely, the nimble fingers of the three at the tractor beam controls.

It was true. Rhodan felt his pulse increase. The six combat robots that had shot the hangar bulkhead accelerated away from it at maximum speed so as to not hinder further action. Debris flew out, then a cloud of people that stretched more in length than in width.

One second.

“Me,” said Thora. This meant that, as discussed, she was the first to access with her tractor beams. She lifted the entire cloud of

overturning bodies a few dozen meters farther up to the hangar access.

Two seconds.

“Thirds!” commanded the Arkonide.

Rhodan and Bull also became active. With terse gestures, they controlled their tractor beams via the holo symbols and pulled the now roughly crescent-shaped crowd into three groups of roughly equal size. They had to be careful not to accelerate the edge areas excessively, so that no one drifted too far.

Three seconds. Four seconds.

“Excellent. Divide it further.”

A sector of the empty hangar spanning about six hundred meters, almost a quarter of the entire ring, had been prepared for the reception of those fished out of space. Rhodan, Bull, and Thora each had four large, open locks at their disposal. In the next step, each of them had to portion their cloud of people accordingly.

Five seconds.

The first difficulties began appearing. Rhodan needed four hands and preferably a second brain. His four groups turned out to be unequally large, and the outermost threatened to be transported past the hangar. He locked onto them with a tractor beam. In the meantime, the first two groups were approaching each other, again alarmingly fast.

Six, seven, eight seconds.

“Stop corrective maneuvers!” commanded Tora. “Get them inside!”

Rhodan had by no means positioned his people ideally. Considering Bull’s cursing, his friend wasn’t faring much better. But Thora was right, of course. They couldn’t afford to spend too much time aligning their groups optimally. In case of doubt, individual losses had to be accepted.

Nine seconds.

Rhodan frantically shifted the small groups. Each of the three-by-four hangar sectors could receive a maximum of forty people at the same time. A very low redundancy, but more was simply not possible given the short preparation time.

Ten seconds.

No more time to count accurately; Rhodan could only estimate whether none of his four groups consisted of more than forty people. He was still worried about the extreme.

Eleven seconds.

“Inside, I said,” insisted Thora.

Whether she herself set a good example eluded Rhodan’s observation; he could not care about that right now. The fact that the Arkonide, on the other hand, was also overseeing Bull’s and his sectors demanded due respect.

His mind raced. Should he maneuver one quarter at a time into their respective hangars or all at the same time? If he handled them one after another, he could work more precisely. For the last group, however, the delay could have fatal consequences.

Twelve seconds.

“Rhodan! Get them in!”

He hastily configured the control of the beams, coupled them, roughly adjusted. He saw that he was about to lose two people, but they were wearing spacesuits, so he was allowed to neglect them for the moment. With a controlled arm movement, he pushed the four groups simultaneously through the hangar airlocks.

Thirteen seconds.

Eight holos switched to interior shots. As Rhodan orientated himself, he felt sweat running into his eyes. He resisted the impulse to wipe it off; to do that, he would have first had to deactivate the

holographic control function. As far as he could see, none of his charges had collided with the frame of the bulkhead. He had brought everyone in safely.

Fourteen seconds.

Now the technicians and logisticians in the hangar took over. They caught the arrivals as gently as possible. Doctors and medo robots provided them with oxygen masks, wrapped them in shock blankets, and transported them through the pressured airlocks.

Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen...

Rhodan breathed a sigh of relief. His contribution was nearly done. He then swiftly tractored the remaining passengers wearing spacesuits into the hangar.

Space. Endless chaos.

Rhino had no chance to even begin to guess whether the daring plan had worked. He was doing somersault after somersault. All around him whirled bodies. Top and bottom, left and right, front and back had lost all meaning in weightlessness.

Mechanically, he continued to count the seconds, but he did not know whether it was too fast or too slow. Invisible forces tugged at him. There was no darkness at all. But was the light coming from the *Tosoma* or a nearby sun? In the latter case, a thought paradoxically flashed through his head, he could get a huge sunburn because he was being exposed to intense UV radiation unprotected. However, he remembered that Thora had given the all-clear in that regard.

His view blurred to the watery colors of an impressionist painting. Rhino was determined to enjoy these seconds, partly because it was a once-in-a-lifetime, unprecedented experience, and partly because it could very well be his last. However, there was absolutely no enjoyment. Instead, he just thought that maybe he would have been better off staying with Renate on good old Earth.

He felt his fingers go numb and his arms swell. At the same time, he realized that in his mind, he had already counted “seven” for the third time...

A domed, steel wall raced towards him or, conversely, towards the shell of the *Tosoma*. All the same. Would he shatter from impact? That would be particularly bitter.

Bitter...

His tongue burned. Boiling hot, he remembered that he would have to look for a new profession if too many taste buds were scorched.

The invisible fist corrected his direction of flight. Along with several others next to him, he was thrown into the hangar, far too fast...and, just before he hit, was cushioned as in wool, in black wool that enveloped him all around, wonderfully soft and warm and comforting.

He lost consciousness. The last thing he noticed was a tremendous explosion that shook the entire ship.

19.

Court

There was no end to this night.

There were disciplinary proceedings, but not against Hetcher and Aescunnar for their arbitrary, unauthorized departure from the station under adverse environmental conditions—that could wait until the next day—but against Dr. Emily Tempsky for sabotage.

The procedure was held in the clearing in the garden dome, against the acoustic background of the gradually subsiding sandstorm. It was attended by the commander, Louanne Riembau, her not nominal but de facto deputy, Wei Si Ping, the security chie,f Idris al-Sharif, the head of the radio station and pharmacy, Pavel Smetana, plus Aescunnar as prosecutor and Tempsky as the defendant.

An unpleasantly oppressive mood was in the air. It didn't go well with the smells that the fans wafted around from the flowering fruit trees and various vegetable beds.

"We are already a strange little community," Riembau began. "No academic faculty, no military unit, no other community such as a village or an order, but a little bit of everything. We have hardly any written rules; a sheriff," she said, giving al-Sharif a brief nod, "but no court. Nevertheless, we must judge here and now. Cyr, what do you have to say against Emily?"

"For some time now, she has been making every effort to prevent the success of the Mars mission," Aescunnar repeated, this time much more systematically. This time, he had gathered and mentally organized the evidence, conclusions, and assumptions. "In the meantime, a re-examination of several hitherto unexplained incidents of the recent past," he concluded, "has revealed that in all of these cases, without exception, Doctor Tempsky had the opportunity to cause the apparent malfunctions or misfortunes. In other words, she has no alibi."

“Sheriff?”

“That’s right. She could have been the perpetrator, i.e. saboteur, every single time. There has not yet been enough time to uncover clear proof, but at least as far as the silting up of the supply station is concerned, we are on the verge of irrefutable proof, and in some other cases too, I am quite sure that we will soon prove willful fault beyond doubt. Not to mention the assault on Cyr, which amounts to a confession.”

“Emily? Can you refute these accusations?”

“No.” The tall, strong woman did not seem at all defeated or despondent. She was also not sunken into herself, but stood high, upright, her chin proudly stretched forward.

“So you’re admitting what you’re accused of?”

“Yes.”

At this point, Aescunnar thought, a thunderclap would have been quite fitting. But the storm that swept through the Valles Marineris did not do him the favor.

“Why did you do all this to us?” asked Louanne Riembau, her face contorted in pain. “Why, Emily, for heaven’s sake?”

“For heaven’s sake,” said Tempsky, “to fulfill.”

A few seconds of stunned silence passed. Then Aescunnar understood. “The district of Otago in the South Island of New Zealand,” he said. “Of course. How could I ignore that!”

“What? Don’t indulge in mysterious statements! Would you be so kind as to let us know?” said the commander with cutting cynicism.

“Gladly. The area around Queenstown and Oamaru attracts not only extreme athletes and other pleasure seekers from all over the world, it has also been the headquarters of the Australian branch of the Young Earth Creationists, the strongest faction of this fundamentalist sect outside the US, for several decades.”

“We are not a sect. We are the elect, the representatives of the only true religion.”

“Yes, well, that’s what many say... So, after you were smuggled into the Mars project with partly forged papers, you avoided any contact with your relatives on Earth! Despite the general work overload, Pavel or Idris or anyone else would probably have noticed at some point that they all belong to the same weird association. Such people compulsively decorate their addresses and messages with missionary symbols and aphorisms.”

“You can’t insult me and my own.”

“Nothing would be further from my intent, dearest,” said Aescunnar, with painstakingly suppressed derision.

“I still don’t understand,” said Riembau.

“Young Earth creationism postulates,” Cyr explained, “that our home world and all life on it were created by God through his direct action no more than ten thousand years ago. The believers take the first book of Moses, Genesis, literally and assume that the seven days of creation mentioned therein describe the first week after an absolute beginning of time. From the literal understanding of the entire Bible as a truthful historical account, from which, among other things, the magnitude of the time that has elapsed since then can be calculated, with approximately ten thousand years being the result. Furthermore, they are of the opinion that biblical statements should take precedence over natural science, or at least be equated.”

“Justifiably,” Tempsky said firmly. “We fight for the light of truth in a fog of lies.”

“But... But the evidence to the contrary is legion,” said Louanne Riembau, dismayed. “How can one deny the findings of geology, dendrochronology, radiometric dating, and countless other branches of research? I don’t know where to start... The entire scientific evidence speaks against this grotesquely arrogant hypothesis!”

“Devil’s work!” declared Tempsky. “The eternal tempter is known for laying false tracks. And he always sends demons to shake the faith of God’s children.”

“The Arkonides?” Smetana rubbed his forehead.

“And those who call themselves Ferrons. A forgery that is easy to unveil because of the clumsy echo of the Latin name for iron. As well as air spirits like the Fantan. Not to forget the lizard creatures, of which the apocryphal writings already warn.”

“Emily, I have come to know you as a smart, reliable, well-intentioned woman who has both feet on the ground,” said the commander.

“That doesn’t contradict my faith in the least.”

Riembau stretched her hands towards the domed roof. “As a rational person, how can one voluntarily be so blind? The very existence of the *Tosoma*, which has been lying at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean for ten thousand years...” Her voice trailed off. “No. Don’t tell me...”

A victorious smile spread across Tempsky’s face. “That satanic machine will not get far. Provision was also made for this. I am not privy to the details. But at least in the preparatory phase of its maiden flight into the sky, one of us will have gone on board.”

Aescunnar saw that Pavel was hot on Smetana’s heels. Soon, he would send a radio message. But wasn’t the *Tosoma* already out of reach?

“Since you are about to ease your conscience,” Wei said to Tempsky, who glowed as if basking in the attention of others, “what else did you and your comrades-in-arms do?”

“Professor Jennings,” replied the New Zealander cheerfully. “The hydrologist did not spoil his stomach by accident. He was poisoned. This was planned long ago to allow me to bring Bradbury Base’s drinking water supply to a standstill over time. Man,” she said insistently, “Adam and Eve...we have no business on Mars. I feel

this with all my soul. Mars doesn't even appear in the Bible."

Louanne Riembau was so fast with the doctor that none of the bystanders could intervene. She grabbed Tempsky by the cuffs of her coat, and although she was more than half a head shorter, she plucked the voluptuous blonde off the floor for a moment. "Nguyen!" she hissed. "Our commander. Confess! Are you also behind his disappearance?"

"N... No." Tempsky suddenly looked confused, suddenly like a child who had grown too tall. "No, I had nothing to do with that. I... We... I would never make an assassination attempt."

"Celia Cienfuegos was seriously injured by the boxes in the storage room," interjected Idris al-Sharif.

"I didn't want that."

Riembau's anger slackened as quickly as it had come upon her. She let go of Tempsky and turned away. "What are we going to do with her?" she asked no one in particular.

"I'm afraid we'll have to lock her away," said the sheriff. "In an improvised prison; one of the cabins will be converted for this purpose. Needless to say, I regret this development."

Tempsky held out her arms. "Tie me up, condemn me; I don't mind. God will absolve me."

The pathetic statement reminded Aescunnar of another famous quote, but he was too tired to think about it for long.

Riembau dissolved the meeting. "It's sad what's happened here, but it can't be changed now. Let's go to sleep."

The night, however, didn't want to end.

Back in his and Hetcher's cabin, Aescunnar took the tablet out of the transparent thigh pocket of his suit. Programmed for it, the device had recorded the abrupt flailing of his roommate in the infirmary.

Aescunnar hadn't gotten around to looking at the translation earlier. Now he had time. As he had suspected, it was Ferron sign language. The gestures meant, *I'm listening! I'm listening!*

What was that supposed to mean?

He was too tired to remove the suit, instead slumping into bed, falling asleep instantly.

In what felt like the next moment, an alarm siren woke him up. He sat up, beating wildly around because he had once again dreamed of Martian monsters. Drunk on sleep, he activated the tablet and connected the station's intranet.

Hetcher had run away again. Although allegedly stunned, the Ferron had grabbed a spacesuit, left Bradbury Base, rendered all but one of Mars mobiles useless for the next few hours, and driven away with the only remaining functional one. The station crew had been caught on the wrong foot and powerless, a pursuit having been rendered impossible.

Aescunnar knew better.

Cursing Mars, Hetcher, Homer G. Adams, Perry Rhodan, and anyone else who could come to mind, he closed the clasps of his suit and plugged in the tablet. He snuck out of the station unmolested, dragging himself to the Mars mobile, which, as if he had suspected something like this, he had parked away from the regular shelter, and took up pursuit.

I must be crazy, he thought, as the vehicle took off. *Wei will be proved right. Hetcher infected me with his incurable madness.*

He knew how risky and irresponsible this approach was. His fanaticism was frighteningly similar to that of Emily Tempsky; he didn't fool himself. But curiosity left Aescunnar no choice. Deep down, he sensed that he was on the trail of something very, very big.

I'm listening! I'm listening... >

Epilogue

The Web

Alarm sirens sounded.

Belinkhar had just tidied up her holographic workspace at the end of a shift as usual. She had stood up, performed the ritual gestures and, appropriately relieved, looked forward to the period of rest due to her. She would read something more, maybe play a short game, then the burden of the day would fall off her.

That's when the location beacon sounded.

"An Arkonide battleship, identification not available in the archives," reported the responsible positronics.

"What does that mean, not present? Are they camouflaging their signature?"

"Not at all. No obfuscation. Still unknown."

That smelled like trouble. Trouble that Belinkhar and her web absolutely did not need. "Attack systems?"

"Present, but currently inactive."

The positronics displayed the determined data. It was a ship of the classical Arkonide spherical shape with an equatorial ring eight hundred meters across. In this respect, it was a serious threat. However, the ship was badly damaged. There was a smoldering hole in its shell.

"Where did they come from? What are they up to?"

As always on such occasions, her shadow, Etztak, appeared out of nowhere between the consoles on the main bridge. "Extremely alarming. Shouldn't we report this ominous ship to the Sector Command of the Imperial Fleet?" he asked, lurking.

He walked forward, as if the weight of his massive upper body were pulling him to the ground. He was a schemer, as he was in the book, an ear hyrax and slime, a constant thorn in Belinkhar's flesh. But it was impossible to shake him off. The matriarch had had to learn to come to terms with him.

She pondered the situation. Etztak was not completely wrong. Alerting the Imperial Fleet would have been a way to get rid of the ship without having to delve deeper into it and its crew. On the other hand, she was very displeased with the idea of calling units of the Grand Empire's military onto the scene. And the spirits that were called were difficult to get rid of, she had learned.

A time bomb, thought Belinkhar. *Or a gift from the star gods from which something can be made. A good deal. A new experience. Either way, an option.*

If she let Etztak alert the fleet, she would never know what this damaged spacecraft was all about. Arkonide generals were not necessarily communicative. They would send scouting parties to snoop around everywhere in the web all the more eagerly.

"No," Belinkhar answered the artificially submissive question. "Establish a radio connection to the ship!" After this was accomplished, she spoke into the acoustic field, "This is matriarch Belinkhar from the clan of the Nahm. Your ship does not have a valid identifier. Please identify yourself and state your request."

Episode 26: Planet of the Lizards

By Bernd Perplies

1.

Among Lizards

Topsid

Thirteen Hours Remaining

Eric Manoli ran for his life.

The fizzing of beam weapons could be heard behind him, and the hissing of his lizard-like pursuers. What they were shouting after him, he couldn't understand. Nor did he have time to muse over whether the tiny translator Positronic in his body was damaged or if the beings were simply speaking unclearly.

He had to run—and it was an incredible struggle. Leg muscles protesting, he fought his way through the thick fog that encompassed him on all sides. The vapor wasn't merely hanging in the air, it was also steaming up out of the sewers, cooling generators on building walls, and squat vents on the roofs. To Manoli, the air seemed thick and wet enough to swim in it. Moving through it was almost as taxing.

Where his wild getaway was leading him, he had no idea. Streets and alleys pulsating with alien life merged around him into a labyrinth with no beginning or end. Thousands of sensations struck him all at once: the smell of roast meat and exotic tea, the caterwauling sound of unfamiliar music, a resounding stamping and hissing from half-open vehicle cabins, and again more lizards! Gray-skinned lizards, green-skinned lizards, brown-skinned lizards, walking on two legs with swinging, fleshy tails and tongues protruding warily from lipless snouts.

"Where am I?" Manoli shouted at them. "What kind of nightmare is this?"

His heart pounded like crazy in his ribcage, his lungs hurt with every breath, and he felt sick with exhaustion. Nevertheless, he

staggered onward. He had to get out of there, had to get away from them. Otherwise they would kill him.

In front of him, at the end of the alley, emerged a bulky vehicle. It reminded him of a military jeep from Earth, but painted bright blue. On a kind of roll cage, a light signal flashed and blinked like on a modern theme park ride.

Two lizards in blue overalls were sitting inside it. Silver shoulder pieces and breastplates adorned their uniforms. When they glimpsed Manoli, they jumped out of their seats and pulled heavy handguns out of their belt holsters. Loud bangs followed, and the air crackled with electrostatic as bright energy bolts shot past him through the fog.

Manoli spun around. He had to get away—anywhere, just not here. He charged deeper into the heart of this alien world.

He circled around one of the huge tower structures that loomed everywhere like chaotically arranged columns of an enormous stilt house. Then he reached a winding staircase. Without hesitation, he charged up it. At the top was one end of a broadly curving metal bridge above a highway with a torrent of four- and six-wheeled vehicles rolling along at a snail's pace.

Wheezing, Manoli ran across the bridge. Behind him, he could already make out the heavy steps of his pursuers, who had stayed hot on his trail. Before him, out of the shadow of an entrance leading into one of the towers at a ten-meter height, two figures appeared—gigantic lizards with dark gray scales. They were wearing a wild hodgepodge of rags and carried knives resembling those from the Far East in their six-fingered hands.

"Arkonide..." one of the two hissed, his split tongue poking out aggressively from under his snout.

Manoli came to a sudden halt. His heart was pounding out of his chest. Sweat was running down his face. His breath was heavy. In a panic, he looked around. Enemies behind him, enemies in front. There looked to be no way out.

His gaze fell on the street below, on the endless convoy of rush-hour vehicles—was it morning, evening?—shuffling through the urban canyon. Searching, his eyes found an open-topped truck filled with what looked like household waste.

This is insanity, Manoli thought. *But it's also my only chance.*

Undaunted, he jumped onto the narrow bridge's railing. His pursuers' energy beam shots whipped past behind him. Up ahead, the two knife wielders hissed angrily. They knew their prey was trying to slip through their fingers.

Manoli took stock, waiting another two heartbeats, then he jumped. The few seconds in the air felt endless. Below him, the truck moved farther...and farther...

No, no! Stay there! he urged it.

It stopped.

With a deep squelch, he landed among the haphazard pile of gray sacks. For one instant, he thanked all the gods operating on this world for letting him survive the jump.

The next moment, he realized that his life could be over quicker than he'd like. The truck was still not moving, and was giving no sign of starting. Either there was the local equivalent of a red light somewhere up ahead or the heavy traffic had come to a total standstill.

He had no time to derive a course of action from this observation. Four bulky figures were already swinging over the bridge's balustrade and plunging towards him. With almost unnatural elegance, they landed on the garbage bags and rose up before him, a wall of scaly death.

In strange unity, the soldiers and brigands stood side by side, knives and beamers in their hands, staring down at him through small eyes that gleamed treacherously. One of the soldiers raised his weapon and aimed the barrel straight at Manoli's head.

"Now you will die, Arkonide!" His finger curled around the

trigger, and scorching hot light enveloped Manoli.

With a jerk, he awoke.

Groaning, he raised his hands to his head and rubbed his face. His undershirt was soaked with sweat, his sheets rumpled as if he'd been fighting in his bed for real, not only in his dreams.

With a grunt, Manoli swung his legs off the low bed and sat up. These nightmares kept plaguing him, full of chases and combat. Almost as often, he found himself strapped to a table in a bright laboratory. Glaring light drove into his eyes, and inhuman voices asked him questions that he didn't understand and couldn't answer. It was horrifying.

As a doctor, he assumed that his restless sleep had several causes. For one, they were an expression of the deep-seated unease that had accompanied him for weeks. On top of that, fragments of memories about his arrival on this world seemed to blend in with his dreams, reminiscences of events hidden from his conscious awareness as if submerged in a thick fog.

Finally, this world's increased gravity no doubt had something to do with it. He didn't have any measuring instruments, but he estimated it was about a third higher than on Earth. This constant additional burden strained his body during waking hours—and when he was asleep too. He was at least glad that the horrible muscle ache in his legs and back had finally abated after the first few days' torment.

Still, I'll be glad when I'm away from here, he thought. It wouldn't be much longer. That night, when the whole planet would be celebrating the Festival of the Three-Moon Constellation, he'd meet someone who would open up a path for him. Finally, this game of hide and seek he had been forced into—for his own safety, of course—would be over. He had been promised that.

It was about time. Manoli was weary. As a scientist, the past few weeks had granted him unbelievably fascinating insights and knowledge. And, to his astonishment, he hadn't encountered

contempt or rejection among the local population, but had rather discovered friendliness and an eagerness to help, which he had hardly expected after everything he'd been told on Earth.

As a human, though, he looked forward to being able to head home. Ultimately, he hadn't embarked on this trip back then, in an underground cavern on Berenger IV, the largest moon of the Vega system's fortieth planet, because he had wanted to discover new worlds and new civilizations. Manoli had wanted to find his friends, Perry Rhodan and Reginald Bull, and of course, Sue Mirafiore, the young mutant he had grown quite fond of during their time as Fantan captives.

Those three, along with the Arkonide Thora, the teleporter Ras Tschubai, and the two Ferrons Chaktor and Lossoshér, had themselves gone through a transmitter to save Thora's adoptive father, Crest da Zoltral. But Manoli's friends had not returned. They remained missing.

Sadly, his plan had been a spectacular failure. For all his efforts, he hadn't found the slightest trace of them, although admittedly, he hadn't been given much room to maneuver.

He could still vividly remember the moment his journey had begun. He and the crippled Fantan, Skelir, had been on a Fantan flounder on a moon's surface. Skelir had just healed him, Sid González, Gucky the Ilt, and Fulkar the Ara from the strange illness they had been struck down with. According to Skelir, they had contracted an infection on board the Fantan space station *Myranar* when the strange aliens had invaded Earth at the end of July and temporarily abducted them as Besun.

Skelir hadn't saved them for entirely altruistic reasons. He was hoping that Manoli would find Sue for him, the brave little mutant girl whom this Fantan was particularly close to because, like him, she had not only healthy limbs, but also a stunted arm. Sue, too, had once been Besun and was thus potentially sick. She might die if Manoli didn't track her down.

"You must notify her," Skelir had urged him.

“I’m afraid we have no way of doing that,” Manoli had replied. “About…three weeks ago, I think…Sue and Reginald went through a transmitter and didn’t return.”

“You could follow them,” Skelir had suggested.

“If only it was that easy! The destination the transmitter was set to won’t respond anymore. And no other transmitter we know about leads to that location. Perry and his companions are missing. We’re totally helpless.”

Then the Fantan had shown him his greatest, most secret Besun: a transmitter under the surface of the moon. They had spoken a lot about trust, practically drunk a toast to their brotherhood…and then Manoli, clad in an Arkonide battledress and equipped with a small survival pack full of field rations and nutrient solutions, had stepped through the transmitter’s cathedral-shaped, matte white arch…

…only to wind up here!

He stood up and shook out his sore limbs. Then he stepped barefoot along the terracotta-esque floor tiles to the only window. He pushed open the shutters, which were made of dark, lattice-like wooden bars, not owing to the owner’s poverty but clearly to serve as ornamentation for this very special building.

Spread out in front of him was the panorama of the steaming city. A forest of towers like stalagmites loomed in front of him. Some were made of metal, most of stone, colored somewhere between ocher and reddish brown. Many of them had ball- or plate-shaped living units impaled on them, individually or in triple constellations like meat or vegetables on a kebab. They varied in height from twenty to two hundred meters, though most in this part of the city were on the smaller side, about forty at most.

Between the living towers, flatter structures were clustered: shacks, stalls, warehouses, garages. Tightly packed and with no recognizable order, they filled the space between columns like overgrown brush on a forest floor. Pipes and cables stretched between the structures along with narrow, perilous-looking bridges

and footpaths that zigzagged through the air between the towers, lit by colored lanterns—the local version of streetlights.

Accompanying all this were the blinking signs of stores, the glow of electronic billboards hanging between the towers, and the light of countless open doors and windows. “Inside” and “outside” were surprisingly fluid spheres here.

Manoli saw a man who had made himself comfortable on a seat in front of a shabby hut. Beside him was an egg-shaped grill with chicken-esque meat cooking on it. A few children were crouching in the shadow of a tower and offering goods on wool blankets that had most likely not belonged to them a few days earlier and that they undoubtedly hadn’t paid for. On a flat roof, a woman was hanging washing out in the hope that the sun would come out in the afternoon. And dozens of passersby were pushing and shoving their way through the narrow alleys between buildings, a not insignificant proportion involved in questionable business, he knew.

Exotic sounds and smells wafted towards him. Not long ago, he wouldn’t have been able to assign any meaning to them. Now he knew that the wailing came from a Chrymasi, a kind of string instrument very popular among street performers. And the distant stamping and hissing wasn’t from a manufacturing plant, but the music cube of a youth listening to loud speak-singing. The scent akin to honey came from a nearby bakery preparing fresh Zefsha, an inexpensive sweet dish. And the bitter note of tar rose from under the lid of an Ahsish, which was best compared to a water pipe.

Over all of it lay a light haze, and the sky over Manoli’s head was bathed in pale violet.

This was the ghetto of Khir-Teyal, his current refuge on Topsid.

I’ve been here nearly three months, he thought. *The first and only human on a planet full of lizards.*

2.

Let There Be Light

North of Terrania

January 5, 2037

A bitingly cold wind blew over the mountains almost a hundred kilometers north of Terrania. On this late afternoon, the sky shone in magnificent colors. It felt like seeing into eternity.

And farther still, Bai Jun thought. The mayor of Terrania narrowed his eyes and let his gaze sweep across the view into the distance. Back there, on the plain below and only visible as a dark, blurry spot on the horizon, was Terrania, the capital city and heart of the Terran Union, Perry Rhodan's vision of a united mankind.

From his position, Bai Jun could just make out the thin needle of the Stardust Tower, which now rose two kilometers above the city and was still growing. He recalled that Lesly Pounder had once called it a modern Tower of Babel.

"But it's actually the exact opposite," the former head of NASA had added. "The Tower of Babel was seen as dangerous by a fearful God, so he took away the people's common language and scattered them across the Earth. Now, the Stardust Tower is bringing humanity together again. It's a symbol of an understanding among nations that's becoming a reality thanks to inventions like the real-time translation network, TerraNet, the artificial language, Terran, and these newly developed translator Positronics."

Bai Jun had only smiled. "Don't tell any of your religious scholars that. To their ears, it might sound like you have a score to settle with your god."

Terrania's mayor blinked and turned his attention to his immediate surroundings. He was at the entrance of a narrow mountain valley that separated the Yinshan mountain range

running from west to east as if it had been cut with a knife. A winding, hastily asphalted road was the only way into this place.

To the left and right, two-thousand-meter peaks rose up. The valley itself tapered off after only a few hundred meters and ended in a steep rock face. A huge structure of light gray concrete had been placed on the mountainside, the facade and entrance for a subterranean complex whose activation was the reason behind his presence there.

The project bore the Chinese name “Guanghui”—radiance—and at first glance, it didn’t make much of an impression. Apart from the facade, nothing could be seen but a series of power lines emerging from within the mountain, stretching down the slope in a long, straight line and across the plain toward Terrania.

Nevertheless, Guanghui was a milestone in the city’s development. For months, energy supply had been a problem for the Terran Union’s rapidly growing capital, and it had demanded a solution. So far, a mixture of Arkonide energy cells and conventional human technology had provisionally supplied the city with electricity. But this approach hadn’t been a promising long-term solution.

Now, with Project Guanghui, that would all change. The key was the fixed installation of an Arkonide fusion reactor, which had been recovered from the refuge on Venus by specialists and brought to Earth on the *Nesbitt-Breck*. If the specifications presented to Bai Jun were accurate, this reactor, which now formed the facility’s impressive core, heavily guarded underground, would supply Terrania with safe, clean energy for quite some time. That would give humanity room to further develop their own technology and add more reactors alongside Guanghui One should that eventually become necessary.

Bai Jun and his assistant, Lhundup, hadn’t come alone to celebrate this. The project had enticed thousands of curious onlookers to visit the Yinshan mountains. They had come in buses and open trucks to witness the symbolic flipping of the switch to activate the fusion reactor. Even more were waiting in the streets of Terrania for the lights to start shining. The mood was exuberant

and full of optimism. Guanghui One was seen as a blessing by the population.

“Mayor, please come here. It’s about to start.” A dark-skinned woman in one of the Guanghui staff’s blue-and-white business suits touched Bai Jun on the arm.

“Of course,” he confirmed. “Lhundup!”

He looked around for his assistant. The young Tibetan with thick black hair that somehow always looked messy despite regular visits to the hair salon was currently a few meters away, chatting with a blond woman whom Bai Jun instantly recognized as a reporter.

The mayor hoped that Lhundup was merely dictating another pearl of wisdom from his Uncle Dalaimoc into her headset. However, he couldn’t be entirely sure of that. Lhundup was a good kid, attentive and loyal, like a sheepdog to the shepherds in the vast highland steppe of Changtang in northwestern Tibet, where he came from. But he had something of a simple disposition that made him miss the subtleties of life on the political stage. For example, the fact that you didn’t always have to tell the truth. Or that silence was sometimes the only right answer to an uncomfortable question.

On the other hand, Bai Jun appreciated him for exactly this quality. The young man didn’t put on airs, but rather said exactly what he was thinking. To Bai Jun, he had become a kind of anchor in a world that had been spinning dizzyingly quickly for the past few months. Maybe that was the very reason Bai Jun had taken him on as his assistant, even though neither his background nor his résumé as an infantryman in the Chinese army had presaged it.

He couldn’t even say exactly when he had met Lhundup. At some point after storming Terrania, after his defection from the Chinese government, and after the death of his former adjutant, He Jian-Dong, the boy had simply appeared. Whenever Bai Jun had shown himself in public, Lhundup had been there waiting for him. Eventually, the mayor had asked Lhundup if he could do anything for him.

“I want to accompany you,” the small but robust Tibetan had

replied. It had been an absurd statement, almost outrageous in its directness—not to mention Lhundup hadn't bothered with polite introductions, treating him more like an old friend rather than showing any of the respect Bai Jun warranted as a former general and now mayor.

"What gives you the idea that I need anyone to accompany me?" he had asked, stunned. He would never forget the answer.

"I can see that you're lonely," Lhundup had said.

Bai Jun had thought it was a bad joke. He still remembered claiming the opposite with a self-assured smile. But the earnestness on Lhundup's face had stayed with him for the rest of the day. And throughout the night. And he had realized that within a handful of encounters, this seemingly simpleminded young man had glimpsed deeper into his heart than many people who were around him all day, every day.

The very next morning, he had sent out an order to find Lhundup and inform him that he wished to appoint him as his personal assistant. Since then, the young man had hardly left his side. And although world politics were still alien to Lhundup, his uncommon wisdom shaped by a simple life in the Tibetan steppe had surprised Bai Jun on more than one occasion. He didn't want to be without the young man's company anymore—even if Lhundup still lacked respect once in a while.

"Lhundup!" the mayor repeated somewhat more loudly. "They're waiting for us!"

Finally, the young man said goodbye to his conversation partner with a graceful bow and hurried over to Bai Jun.

"Forgive me," he said. "I didn't want to be impolite. That young woman had so many questions about my life. We could have talked for hours."

"Not today, Lhundup. We have an important task ahead of us."

"What task?"

“Looking good,” Bai Jun replied.

They followed the power company employee to the temporary stage erected from wooden boards and metal struts where the opening ceremony would take place. In the middle was a modest lectern with the banner of the Terran Union hanging from it, depicting the Milky Way on a blue background. At the back of the stage, an enormous screen had been set up, depicting the skyline of Terrania from a distance of about ten kilometers away.

Already waiting on the platform were several other politicians and industry figures who had contributed to the project in various ways. This included administrator Homer G. Adams. As Bai Jun knew, he’d only just returned from a three-day visit to the Venus refuge and almost hadn’t made it to this appointment on time. Only a hurried helicopter transfer had enabled his attendance. Now, he was talking to the project manager, a gaunt Russian energy engineer called Aleksander Sacharov, and waiting for the signal to step up to the lectern.

A technician in blue and white overalls popped his head up over the edge of the platform and gave a thumbs-up. Everything was ready. They could start.

With slow steps, Adams stepped up to the lectern. Due to the icy cold, he was wearing a thick parka, but Bai Jun would have bet anything that underneath it was the same threadbare jacket with patched elbows that the hunchbacked old man always seemed to have on. In spite of his lofty office and the countless billions in his account—or maybe *because* of these factors—Adams availed himself of the freedom to walk around like a pensioner with a modest income who fed the pigeons in New York City’s Central Park and waited for a partner to play chess with.

Bai Jun, who had grown up in a world of etiquette, hierarchies, and proper manners had never understood this foible. In his eyes, a suit like that simply wasn’t becoming of a man of Adams’s status. And that was only one of several aspects that still made him regret that instead of Perry Rhodan, a man of real quality, Adams had received the post of Administrator of the Terran Union—even if the ex-industrialist and philanthropist deserved credit for all he had

already done to help realize the dream of a united humanity.

Adams cast his eyes across the assembled crowd and gave them a moment to quiet down. Then he began to speak, his words being translated by TerraNet in real time so that all present could understand him.

“Rome wasn’t built in a day, as the old saying goes. And yet, Rome was ultimately one of the most glorious cities of the ancient world, a shining beacon of civilization. Of course”—he raised his hands reassuringly—“it was also the heart of an empire based on conquest, so I don’t want to carry the analogy too far.”

A few isolated laughs acknowledged this statement.

“What I’m getting at is more that Terrania, too, won’t be built in a day. No one can deny that. The circumstances in which some of you must live are still far more unpleasant than they should be. I am well aware of that, and I’m fighting every day to remedy one problem after another. But that doesn’t mean we have reason to despair. In the last few months, we’ve already achieved incredible things together—all of us.”

He looked back on the past half a year and lauded the advances Terrania had made in that time. That was just one of the things you had to do at these events.

Bai Jun felt his attention wandering. On the outside, he didn’t let it show—he continued watching Adams with a mask of serious concentration—but, to be honest with himself, his presence felt like wasted time. It wasn’t necessary for him to stand next to the Terran Union’s administrator and hold his hand. Besides, he’d already had to endure too many speeches in his life.

As mayor, it should really have been Bai Jun’s duty to deliver this speech and flick the symbolic switch to activate the fusion reactor. In any other city, it would have played out that way. But Terrania wasn’t just any old metropolis. It was the capital of the whole world—something Earth had never had before. The same was true of the administrator position that Adams occupied. For that reason, all members of the government’s inner circle found it right

and important that the old man and the young city, both symbols of the new, united mankind, appeared in the media together as often as possible.

Bai Jun's function as mayor, on the other hand, was best compared to the rank of first officer on board the "*Starship Terrania*." He had Adams's back, took care of day-to-day business, and made sure that everything ran like clockwork. These days, it didn't earn him much renown.

The pragmatist in him took that in his stride. They were all serving the same goal: to lead humanity into a new era. There was no room for envy or resentment. The man-about-town and self-promoter he'd played for a long time in the army would have found it tougher to take a back seat.

Bai Jun allowed himself a thin smile. It wasn't just Terrania that had undergone an astonishing transformation over the last few months. The same was true of him. He still remembered it like it was yesterday—being in a casino in Macau on the eve of invading Taiwan and receiving the order to immediately abort his operation and head to the landing site of the crazy Americans and their alien in the Gobi Desert.

Bai Jun had always been the man for extraordinary missions, so this command had hardly surprised him. He had found the *Stardust*, the Americans' spacecraft, surrounded by an impenetrable energy shield, against which all conventional weapons the Chinese army had to offer stood no chance. Subsequently, his men had established a siege around the landing site and thus caused a standoff. He may not have been able to get to the Americans and their guest from the stars, but they also couldn't come out of their reddish shimmering protective bubble.

Bai Jun had been a good soldier, an outstanding strategist, and a man who wasn't easily impressed. But his encounter with Perry Rhodan, the *Stardust*'s commander and the mastermind behind the act of madness of renouncing all Earth's governments and proclaiming himself "a Terran," had shaken Bai Jun's worldview more strongly than he had ever thought possible. At first, he had seen the American, who had torn the flag from his uniform and

thrown it into the desert sand, as misguided. But the opposite had been true. Perry Rhodan had a vision sparked by the knowledge that Earth was just one small planet in a vast universe full of life.

Bai Jun had struggled, with himself, with his party-loyal adjutant, He Jian-Dong, and with the Chinese secret service. Meanwhile, Rhodan had started to found a city beneath the energy dome, one that in his eyes was the start of a new era for humanity. And outside in the desert, first hundreds, then thousands of idealists gathered from all over the world to share in that dream with him.

But only when the government had planted a nuclear bomb at the shield's edge without Bai Jun's knowledge, aiming to force an entry with the ultimate weapon, did he manage to pull away from his government and take his own step into the future. A young mutant called Sid González had teleported the bomb out into the desert, but it had exploded nonetheless, and thousands of terrified people had charged towards the energy shield, which they had hoped would offer protection. Rhodan had been forced to switch it off and was, shortly thereafter, obliged to flee from Terrania as Bai Jun marched his army in with a feeling of bitter triumph.

But instead of handing the city over, I used the victory celebration to declare it independent again, he thought, not without some pride. Just like Rhodan, he had torn the flag from his uniform jacket. Since then, he had always carried it in his breast pocket—along with Rhodan's American one—so that he would never forget those days.

He had immediately put his abilities to work in service of Terrania, using his soldiers and coordination skills to ensure order and help with construction. Back then, many had harbored suspicions towards Bai Jun and his motives, especially Reginald Bull, Perry Rhodan's most trusted friend. Through tireless persistence, Bai Jun had managed to convince them all, one after another, of his sincere change of heart. True, he had only just managed to clinch the mayoral election in December, but with each passing day, things were looking up as more and more people saw him as a Terran and not a former Chinese general.

But the path had claimed victims. He Jian-Dong, his adjutant of

many years, who had been like a son to him, had turned against him and collaborated with the secret service. Bai Jun still blamed himself for not noticing the young man's inner struggle early enough; the battle between loyalty to his general and to his homeland. Maybe he could have brought Jian-Dong over to his side. On the other hand, until the narrowly avoided nuclear disaster, he hadn't even been certain of his own loyalties.

Bai Jun had given the young soldier a second chance. However, he hadn't had much time to prove himself. Only two weeks later, He Jian-Dong had lost his life during an exploration mission at the bottom of the Atlantic, not far from the Azores, when his craft was classed as an enemy by the submerged battleship *Tosoma* and destroyed. Sometimes, Bai Jun found himself wondering what it would be like if his old adjutant were still standing by his side.

His new assistant—the post of adjutant no longer existed, since Bai Jun had left the military—tugged at his sleeve.

"It's time," Lhundup whispered with an excited expression.

Bai Jun returned to the here and now. It was almost dark, and the organizers had turned on spotlights to light the stage.

"This day marks an especially important milestone on the long journey of Terrania's construction," Adams was saying. "From now on, all our energy problems will be a thing of the past. And so, I officially present to you Guanghui, the newly built fusion power station, the very first of its kind. Let us shine new light on Terrania; a light that will show us the way to the future."

Adams stepped away from the lectern and over to a metallic box with a large red lever protruding from it. This was only a symbol, of course, but one that could be seen even from the back row of the audience. The administrator cast one last glance around at those watching and gave a knowing smile to the camera drones hanging in the air before him.

Then he flipped the switch—and all light surrounding the stage disappeared.

3.

The Purple Nest

Topsid

Eleven Weeks Remaining

"Open your eyes, Erikk-Mahnoli. Wake up. You're safe now."

A softly imploring voice with a light hissing lisp reached his ears. It was so quiet that Manoli wondered if he was imagining it. But it spoke to him with a persistence that suggested otherwise.

"Come on, Erikk-Mahnoli! Wake up now. You've slept enough."

With a groan, he indicated that he'd heard what the unseen person was saying, but had no inclination to obey it. His skull was throbbing, his limbs ached, and he felt so weak that it almost made him ill.

Disjointed images flicked through his mind: lizards in uniforms, lizards in gray smocks, a metal bed, bright light, questions, pain. Then an explosion—or had the explosion come first? Someone had grabbed him by the arm.

"If you want to live, come with me."

An escape from a building and then running through the streets of a huge, indescribably alien city. Shouting, weapons fire, a blow to the head, and a plummet—or a plummet that had ended in him hitting his head? Then, only blackness.

"Where am I?" he managed to utter.

"In the Purple Nest. In safety."

"In the what?" With some effort, he opened his eyes, only to flinch in shock a moment later. The words "Mamma mia!" crossed his lips.

The brown-scaled lizard above him cocked her head, uncomprehending. “No, I am Khatleen-Tarr. Don’t you remember me? Bismall-Kehn asked me to take care of you until you’re feeling better.”

Manoli shook his head. “I’m sorry. I... I don’t remember much of what’s happened recently. It’s all jumbled in my mind.”

“You hit your head quite hard,” Khatleen-Tarr said. “You were unconscious when we found you on the nest’s doorstep.”

“On the doorstep?”

Khatleen-Tarr cocked her head. “Someone dropped you off there. Suki-Garm saw you there, and together we brought you into the building. You slept for a long time. On Bismall-Kehn’s orders, I watched over you. Twice, you briefly came to. Then I gave you something to drink before you fell asleep again. How is it this time? Will you close your eyes again?”

On the one hand, Manoli wanted nothing more. But on the other, he felt his spirits awakening, and with them, curiosity about where he was. The last clear memory he had was of his step through the transmitter on Berenger IV. After that, everything was very vague.

And suddenly, he had found himself here, in a small room with a wall that curved outward like a tower. Red, violet, and gold woven cloths were hanging on the walls, and the doors and closed shutters were made of a kind of thin wooden mesh.

“No,” he said. “No, I think I’m really awake this time.”

Tentatively, Manoli lifted his head to take in his surroundings a little more. He ascertained that he was barefoot and clad in only an undershirt and boxers. His body was resting on a large, round piece of upholstered furniture, its wide edge raised in a nest-like manner, with numerous egg-shaped cushions scattered across it. He assumed this was a bed. The cushions and sheets were covered in silky, reflective material in a peculiar wave pattern.

Aside from that, there was a kind of dressing table in the room,

although nothing was on it except for a variety of small bottles with colorless essences inside. There were also a few upholstered stools, and through a beaded curtain, he could see what looked like a washing alcove. It was curious: all these items looked so familiar to him that he could immediately guess their purpose. And yet, he couldn't shake the strong feeling that something was off, as if he was very far from home—an impression that was amplified to a not insignificant degree by the slender lizard being with glossy brown-scaled skin sitting attentively by his side.

"You're a Topsidan, aren't you?"

"That's correct."

"Your name is Khatleen-Tarr, you said?"

She tilted her head again—clearly her version of a nod. "But you don't need to be so formal, Erikk-Mahnoli. I'm not the nestmistress. You can call me Khatleen, at least when we're alone."

"Gladly, Khatleen." He sat up on the bed and held out his hand to her. "If you call me Eric."

Khatleen-Tarr jerked back slightly. She blinked several times and her tongue darted forward and back. At the same time, the scales on her snout grew faintly darker, as if she were blushing, though whether in anger or embarrassment, he couldn't tell.

"Jeez. Did I say something wrong?" Manoli uttered. "If so, I'm sorry. I certainly didn't mean to."

"No," the Topsidan reassured him. "It's fine. I was just surprised. But you couldn't know."

"Know what?" he asked.

"That we only use our half-names when we want to mate." Now that she had overcome her astonishment at the clearly rather salacious term of address, Khatleen-Tarr let out a hissing laugh. "Actually, I don't hear it all that rarely here in the Purple Nest. Only, it sounded a little strange coming from an Arkonide. Do you wish to mate with me, then, Erikk-Mahnoli?"

She playfully turned her upper body left and right, as if presenting herself to him, and only now did Manoli notice that, apart from an airy gold and blue tunic and a few golden jewelry bands on her arms, she was wearing very little on her body. Her smooth brown scales shimmered in the soft light of the ceiling lamp, and her slender tail glided over her strong, shapely legs as if caressing them.

Now it was Manoli's turn to blush. His next question should have been to ask exactly what the Purple Nest was. But upon a second glance at the large bed and at Khatleen-Tarr herself, he was suddenly confident that he already understood.

"Oh, uh, no thank you! I... That's definitely not what I was trying to say." He cleared his throat."

"Don't be so shy, Erikk-Mahnoli," the Topsidan breathed, stroking her upper body with finely smoothed claws. "True, I've never been with an Arkonide, but I'm open to experiments." Naturally, as a lizard, she had no breasts, but even without this clearly feminine gender marker, in some strange way, she came across as distinctly...female. He had never expected to think that about a being who could have evolved from Earth's monitor lizards.

I bet the men around here worship the ground you walk on, Manoli thought. "Well, thank you for the offer. It's truly flattering. But right now, I don't really feel...uh..."

A hissing laugh released him from his stammering. "I was just teasing you, Erikk-Mahnoli," Khatleen-Tarr explained. She looked like a young woman greatly amused after having used her wiles to embarrass a markedly older man.

And maybe she's exactly that, Manoli considered. He didn't have the slightest clue how to tell a Topsidan's age. Nor did he know when they reached sexual maturity and at what age their societal system allowed prostitution, if Khatleen-Tarr's activities here indeed had such negative connotations. Maybe the Purple Nest was the most respectable venue in town and home to a totally normal recreational activity among Topsidans.

“Don’t worry,” his host continued. “I won’t force you to do anything you don’t want to. Besides, Bismall-Kehn doesn’t approve of us giving away our services for free. We have a reputation to maintain.”

“Of course,” Manoli said. So, at least he hadn’t wound up in a third-rate excuse for a brothel. To be fair, he wouldn’t have assumed so anyway, judging by the furnishings and, if Kathleen-Tarr was any indication, the employees.

“Besides, you’re still far too weak. And it’s clear that your body isn’t made for the gravity on Topsid.”

“Topsid?” Manoli asked, his ears suddenly pricking up. “I’m on Topsid? Your people’s homeworld?”

“Where did you think?”

He shrugged. “To be honest, I still hadn’t formed a clear picture.”

“Then start here with us,” his companion suggested. “I’ll show you around a little. And after that, Bismall-Kehn will want to see you.”

“Who is this Bismall-Kehn you keep mentioning? Does he own the Purple Nest?”

“Yes,” Khatleen-Tarr confirmed. “He’s the nestmaster. He gives us outsiders a home and a job, and he protects us from all the threats of Khir-Teyal’s streets.”

“Is that the name of the city we’re in?”

“No. The city’s called Kerh-Onf. It’s the capital of Topsid. Khir-Teyal is a ghetto in the east of the city. But I’m sure Bismall-Kehn will explain all of that better than me. I assume you’ll have a meal with him.”

“I would be very much in favor of that,” said Manoli. He was ravenously hungry. He hoped the local dishes were tolerable to the human body.

That said, Topsid didn't seem to differ from Earth as greatly as he might have expected. The air was warm and tasted oddly fragrant, but it was perfectly breathable for humans; otherwise, he would have long since suffocated. Nor did his surroundings seem so overly alien. There had been no terrible culture shock, putting aside the walking, talking, and distinctively clothed lizard keeping him company. As such, he assumed the local food offerings would present little danger of immediately killing him.

"Come on!" Khatleen-Tarr said, tapping the bedsheets with the end of her tail in an ushering manner. "Go into the washroom and freshen up. There's a water dispenser there as well as towels to dry yourself. If you'd like something to drink, there's also a jug of berry wine. Don't worry; it's very light. It won't intoxicate you."

Manoli nodded to her. "Thanks!"

Groaning, he got up and clambered awkwardly over the edge of the bed. Then he looked down at himself.

"Uh, tell me...you don't happen to have any clothes I could wear, do you? I'd rather not be walking around and going in front of Bismall-Kehn in this state of undress. It might not be clear to you, but what I'm wearing now is, well...underwear. The kind that's more practical than pretty." *And that I've been wearing for days,* he added in his mind.

He couldn't be entirely sure. The people who had taken off his Arkonide battledress, survival pack, and overalls had evidently been quite taken with his wristwatch as well. Manoli had no idea how long he had spent on Topsid so far. He urgently needed to find some kind of timekeeping device. Then maybe he would manage to figure out at least a rough conversion into Earth's time measurements.

"Of course," said Khatleen-Tarr, who had sat up in the bed. "I'll get you clothes and shoes from one of the servants."

With an elegant motion, she glided over the edge, stood in front of him, and took his measure with a quick glance. The way she appraised Manoli reminded him more of a police or military officer,

not a “lady of easy virtue” who had come straight from the streets into a dependent relationship with a bordello.

You’re still thinking in Earth terms, Manoli scolded himself. And even on Earth, the courtesans of a high-class escort service could offer not only good manners, but also a high level of education.

The Topsidan tilted her head with satisfaction. “I’ll be right back with you,” she announced before leaving the room.

In the meantime, Manoli stepped through the beaded curtain and found a spacious shower behind it. Topsidans clearly preferred having a lot of space. Presumably, this was linked to their preference for inefficiently spacious round structures and the fact that they carried thick, cumbersome tails behind them.

The warm water flow from the shower truly did his ill-treated body good. However, he left the pumice-like scrubbing stone where it was.

After showering, he checked himself for damage. In the process, he found not only countless bruises and an impressive bump on the back of his head, but also traces of burns, chafed wrists and ankles, and fine puncture wounds on his arms, indicating that he had been injected. Whatever had happened to him, exactly, it hadn’t been a pleasant time.

It looks like I was tortured, he thought. *When I stepped out of the transmitter, I must have wandered right into a Topsidian government facility.* He wondered how he had possibly gotten out of there. And how many secrets about Terra and recent events he had let slip first. *Hopefully there isn’t a fleet on the way to Earth at this very moment to “thank” us for thwarting their invasion of the Vega system.*

Of course, Perry Rhodan had brokered a peace at the end of that crisis, and the Topsidans had received a transmitter in exchange for providing reconstruction aid, which meant they had actually done quite well with the deal. Still, it was essentially a forced peace, and Manoli doubted the lizards were especially happy about it.

Shortly thereafter, Khatleen-Tarr reappeared, bringing him a pair

of Romanesque sandal boots and a knee-length brown tunic with short sleeves and crimson decorative elements. A belt of the same color accompanied it. Manoli felt a little ridiculous wearing it, but it was better than walking around in his underwear.

After that, she led him out of the room and took him on a quick tour of the building. As it turned out, the Purple Nest was in a tower about fifty meters tall. Right at the bottom was a generously sized entryway where guests were welcomed by a dainty female Topsidan. Two rather larger doormen with stony expressions and bronze-colored plate armor ensured that any questionable figures from the street stayed outside.

Via a magnificent spiral staircase with ornate banisters that wound around the tower's inside edge, they made their way to the lowermost of three spheres stacked on top of one another. This was the Great Parlor, a bombastic dream that looked like a mixture of Middle Eastern harem and lizard colony breeding ground.

The reddish brown stone floor, which was polished to a mirror sheen but still displayed the grain of ancient rock, was elevated. From it, countless staircases led to circular pits that were sunken into the ground and held thickly cushioned seats and small tables. Fragile metal sculptures, sprawling succulent plants, and stunning chandeliers on the ceiling made for a decidedly decadent ambiance.

At the moment, all the pits were empty. "It's still too early in the day for visitors," Khatleen-Tarr explained.

Only a few servants were present. Dressed just like Manoli, they were busy wiping the floor, polishing the statues, and replacing cushions.

The next level was equipped with a series of small rooms that looked much like the one in which Manoli had woken up. His companion referred to them as "nest rooms." The doctor didn't need to ask what purpose they served.

The middle sphere, hanging a few meters above the lower one, held another, smaller parlor. It was decorated entirely in gold and purple, and looked even more exclusive than its counterpart below.

“Only the most important guests are served here,” Khatleen-Tarr explained. “Guests concerned about their privacy, if you know what I mean.”

“So high-ranking figures come here too?” Manoli asked.

“No one likes to talk openly about the Purple Nest,” the young Topsidan replied. “But any self-respecting person with enough means knows about it. And most of them have come here before...often multiple times.”

So there are a few universal constants in the galaxy, Manoli thought sardonically. On Earth, too, the rich liked to sweeten their free time with a beauty or two.

Beyond the purple parlor, they had to pass another duo of guards. Then they reached the staff’s private area, where both the girls and servants lived together.

This area had the most life at the moment. The doors to the room’s largest section stood open. Light, rhythmic music hung in the air, and everywhere, Topsidans in varying states of dress or undress were facing one another and chatting, grooming, or even eating a little food.

Although they didn’t fundamentally differ in terms of body structure, Manoli found it surprisingly easy to tell the men from the women. Of course, that might have come down to Bismall-Kehn’s apparent preference for slim women and burly men. Their clothes, too, helped a great deal in this regard.

Numerous heads turned. Curious eyes stared at him as he accompanied Khatleen-Tarr through the round entrance to the nearest staircase. And curious tongues darted out of long snouts to taste his scent. Some began to whisper. Others hissed disparagingly at him.

“You don’t often get visitors from outside, do you?” he asked when they were on the staircase. “From way outside, I mean.”

“From Arkonides?” Khatleen-Tarr turned her head to the side,

then back again. “No. You’re a phenomenon that stands out here.”

“Positively or negatively?” he asked, half as a joke.

The Topsidan cocked her head questioningly. “You can’t seriously be trying to tell me that you don’t know how relations are between our two cultures? What colonial world do you come from, exactly?”

“I…uh…” Manoli ran a sheepish hand over his head as his mind raced feverishly. “I don’t pay much attention to politics. I’m a doctor, and I come from a small agrarian world. I lived there until I… I was kidnapped one day. After that…there’s a big hole in my memory.”

“I see, so you’re a belly slicer,” Khatleen-Tarr said.

“I mean, it sounds sort of violent coming from you.”

A hissing laugh met this remark. “Coming from me! Very good. Aren’t the personal doctors of high-ranking figures on Arkon called just that?”

“Oh, uh…yes, that’s true. Like I said, I’m just a simple country doctor. Politics isn’t my thing.”

“Nor mine,” the Topsidan proclaimed. “I leave all that to Bismall-Kehn. We’re here, by the way. His dining room is behind that door.” She turned to one of the servants. “Tell the nestmaster that his guest is here.”

The servant nodded and vanished behind the door.

While Khatleen-Tarr and Manoli waited in the hallway for his return, the Topsidan bent down to him.

“In case your earlier question was about your outer appearance…I’m afraid I have to disappoint you. You’re probably too skinny for most of the girls. And…well, don’t get me wrong, but you don’t have anything down there.”

Ouch, Manoli thought. *If a human woman said that, it would be a*

real punch in the gut. But naturally, he knew that she was referring to his lack of a tail. He gave her a sour grin. “Then it’s a good thing I’m not actually looking for a partner right now.”

The servant came back. “The Arkonide may enter now.”

“I’ll see you later, Erikk-Mahnoli,” his companion said, almost ceremoniously.

“I look forward to it, Khatleen-Tarr,” he replied. “And thank you for the tour.”

He followed the servant into the dining room. It was a medium-sized chamber that, like all the others, put the owner’s proclivity for opulence and extravagance on full display. In the center was an oval table with space for six guests. In front of two of the chairs, which had curved, S-shaped backrests to allow for the Topsidans to sit comfortably, two places had been set.

Next to the table stood a green-scaled male. He looked rather on the short side for a Topsidan and had a substantial corpulence that could only result from a life spent wanting for nothing. He was clothed in a floor-length caftan made of a reddish-violet material that shimmered silkily. On his head sat a jaunty-looking matching hat. On his left shoulder, meanwhile, perched a forearm-length, emerald green flying lizard. He looked like a space pirate from *One Thousand and One Galactic Nights*.

“Welcome, Erikk-Mahnoli,” he said in a powerful voice. “Welcome to my domain. I am Bismall-Kehn, the nestmaster. I’ve been expecting you.”

4.

A Shadow of the Past

North of Terrania

January 5, 2037

Cries of alarm swept through the crowd assembled in the mountain valley as it suddenly went pitch black. The very next instant, awestruck cries of wonder followed, as high above the people's heads, new spotlights came to life. They were attached to the powerline masts and formed a blazing beam of light along the silvery strands. Pylon after pylon lit up, a white wave of energy racing from the power station towards Terrania, which was visible on the horizon as a faded speck of light. The bright thread of light grew smaller and smaller until it could hardly be seen anymore.

Then fireworks exploded on the enormous screen behind Adams, Bai Jun, and the others. Terrania lit up in a blinding blaze. Every street light, every lamp in every building, and every illuminated sign came on at once, bathing the capital in a sea of color and light. Most magnificent of all, though, was the Stardust Tower, which rose high up into the dark sky, glittering and sparkling like a giant Christmas tree thanks to a light show set up just for this occasion.

It was a moving sight. Bai Jun felt a shiver run down his spine. Although he had known what would happen as one of the event's planners, that did nothing to take away the power of this image. A mighty applause broke out from the crowd. The residents of Terrania were audibly expressing their relief over the end of the constant energy rationing.

Once the initial rapture had died down, Adams spoke a few hopeful closing remarks before the gathering slowly disbanded. The guests made their way in groups to the temporary parking lot at the valley's edge, where their vehicles were waiting for them. This included Bai Jun, who headed to his car with Lhundup after exchanging a few short words with Adams and the project manager,

Sacharov.

Naturally, there was quite a throng to push through. Lhundup did his best to make a path for Bai Jun, but there was no keeping numerous other visitors from barging into him. Suddenly, a young woman collided with him particularly hard. He felt a hand in his jacket, and his soldier instincts reacted at once.

Quick as a flash, his hand jerked forward and grabbed the young woman's slender forearm. She lifted her head, and for one second, Bai Jun and the unknown person stared at each other in the twilight.

It felt like lightning had struck him. His eyes widened, and his grip loosened involuntarily. The woman—an Asian, a young thing, actually still a girl—took her chance and pulled her hand out of his. She whirled around and fled through the crowd and off into the darkness with Bai Jun's wallet.

"Lhundup!" he cried. "Catch the thief!"

But he didn't even need to express the order. The former shepherd and infantryman had already sprung ahead like a predator and was hunting his quarry. Bai Jun pushed after him but fell hopelessly behind them both. It wasn't just that he lacked agility; as mayor of Terrania, he also couldn't let himself plough the crowd without regard. His office came with certain restrictions, such as keeping a dignified appearance in public.

He quickly opted for a new strategy. The thief may have escaped into the mass of people, but that wouldn't help her escape from the mountain valley. They were a hundred kilometers away from Terrania. Getting back there required a vehicle, and all the vehicles were in the parking lot at the valley's entrance, with only one street leading away. He just had to make the parking wardens check the leaving vehicles, and then the woman had no chance of getting away from him. Especially since he would be able to pick her out of a crowd of thousands.

Her face had already burned itself into his mind back in Hohhot. Those large, dark eyes had stared at him full of fear and disbelief as

he had grabbed her and run his knife through her throat. The rosy lips had opened to whisper a single word: “Mama.”

For a moment, Bai Jun grew weak. He stopped where he stood and rubbed his face. What was he thinking? That girl had been dead for years. He had been a young man then, right at the start of his short career with the secret service before joining the military. He had been sent to Hohhot to deal with an enemy of the Chinese state.

Bai Jun had carried out the order without any hesitation or regret. He would have long since forgotten this contract killing if not for this young whore, this child who had stepped out of the bath at the worst moment imaginable in the apartment where Bai Jun had the man cornered.

He should have been alone! Nothing in the run-up had indicated that he had brought child prostitutes from Hohhot’s red-light district to his room. And yet, she had been there, seen Bai Jun, and had to be eliminated as a witness. For years, this act had given him nightmares, and even now, the past sometimes caught up with him.

Yes, that must be it, Bai Jun thought. He had been in a reflective mood this afternoon already. In all likelihood, his subconscious was playing tricks on him and had made a stranger’s face look familiar in the dusky light.

There was no explaining the incident otherwise. He believed in neither reincarnation nor ghosts that took form to torment the guilty among the living. Soon, Lhundup would reappear with the petty thief—or the parking wardens would pick her up during their surveillance—and the whole thing would turn out to be nothing but a silly misunderstanding.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder.

“Jun, I have her,” Lhundup said. “She wasn’t hard to catch.”

Bai Jun turned around, and his heart lurched painfully in his chest.

It's her, he thought when he saw the girl. The young thief was fighting against his assistant's grasp, but if Lhundup had learned anything in his childhood, it was how to keep hold of a stubborn animal.

"Here. Your wallet." His assistant held out the small leather item.

Narrowing his eyes, the mayor stepped closer and took it. When he looked more closely at the young thief's face, something like relief surged through him. Naturally, she wasn't the girl he had murdered in Hohhot. But she looked astoundingly similar. Those dark eyes, that round yet gaunt-looking face, the red-painted lips...

"What should I do with her, Jun?" Lhundup asked. "Should I put her over my knee and spank her so she doesn't get stupid ideas again? That's how we'd do it back home."

His assistant's words brought him back to reality. Bai Jun blinked, then shook his head. "No."

"You want to hand her over to the police? They'll just let her go, then she'll go thieving again!"

"Not that either," Bai Jun replied. "We'll take her with us."

The girl's eyes widened in shock, and she tried to struggle out of Lhundup's grip, but in vain. His assistant, on the other hand, took this revelation with surprising serenity.

"Good," was all he said.

Bai Jun turned to the young thief and raised his hands reassuringly. "Don't worry. I only want to help you. My name is Bai Jun. What's yours?"

She ducked her head a little and eyed him warily. "Cui," she then revealed in a trembling voice, though it wasn't entirely clear if this was due to fear or the cold.

"All right, Cui. You're coming with us now. We'll take you back to Terrania. And on the journey, we'll talk, okay?"

With a barely visible nod, she indicated her agreement. She still looked unsettled, but was clearly prepared to play along with the strange game the unknown man had in mind, at least for a little while.

The three of them walked over to the parking lot and got into Bai Jun's limousine. Until recently, Terrania's streets had been characterized by Chinese military jeeps and trucks, but the city was becoming ever more attractive to civilian suppliers, allowing its mayor to obtain a means of transportation befitting his status: a Brilliance EX8. The all-terrain limo wasn't quite as well suited to the Gobi's desert climate as a military vehicle, but in exchange, it offered more comfort and kept Terrania's residents from feeling like their city was led by soldiers.

For Bai Jun, that had perhaps been the most important reason for agreeing to the new car. He was already fighting enough against his past as a general in the People's Army.

Inside the vehicle, the temperature was markedly more comfortable than outside in the valley by night. And when Lhundup, who got behind the wheel, switched on the heating, it became positively cozy. Bai Jun, who sat on the wide back seat with Cui, observed with mild amusement as the girl held her ice-cold fingers by the heating vents below the window.

"Would you like something to drink?" he asked. "A cola?" He opened a hatch in the center of the car and pulled out a plastic bottle, which he offered to her. Silently, and with the voracity of someone who normally lived hand-to-mouth, she took hold of it.

While Cui drank the soft drink, he considered his position. In a legal sense, his actions here were awkward, to say the least. He should essentially either have given the young thief to the police or let her go. He couldn't keep her captive, even if she didn't seem to be entirely aware of that—another indication of the social stratum she presumably came from originally, where illegal confinement was a daily reality.

Bai Jun wondered how she had ended up in Terrania. Had she flown from her pimp and come here seeking a better life, only to

wind up on the street again? He couldn't believe that and didn't want to. In Terrania, people took care of one another. No one had needed to live on the street and steal to survive since the muddled early days of the city's founding. Not that he'd heard of, anyway.

But maybe I'm already too distant from the people, he thought. His office as mayor and member of the Terran Union's Inner Council gave him a deluge of duties that demanded his full attention. Given the many visionary projects he was currently following, it was easy to lose sight of what was happening right under his nose.

That despite his apartment purposely being only on the Stardust Tower's tenth floor. His PR advisors had thrown their hands up in horror when they had learned that there were even tax accountants and dentists who lived higher up than the mayor of the city.

Bai Jun had remained adamant, however. "High enough to get an overview, but close enough to the ground that I won't take off into the stratosphere," he had given as his reason for his choice of abode.

But clearly, he had been wrong. Even ten stories above the streets was too much if it took having his wallet stolen to realize that lost souls like Cui existed in the neighborhood.

And despite that, it's not pure sympathy that's motivating you, right? asked a provocative voice deep inside him.

Bai Jun had to unwillingly admit the voice was right. His behavior wasn't just legally questionable, but also astonishingly irrational for the circumstances. It was as if he were following an inner compulsion. He wanted to help Cui, who looked so much like the murdered girl from years ago, no matter what. To do something good for her.

Do I really think I can make amends after all this time? he asked himself. *Am I looking for atonement? Or, after all the years I spent playing the man-about-town, has the longing for a family suddenly awoken?*

His gaze wandered forward to Lhundup. Bai Jun could see his

eyes, which were intently focused on the outside world, in the rear-view mirror. He, too, was young enough to be Bai Jun's son.

Maybe I'm slowly going crazy. The last few months have shaken up our worldview on a daily basis. Even the best man must fear for his inner balance.

He should start meditating more often again. Since his election to mayor, he had done it far too rarely.

Bai Jun sighed silently. In the end, it was all the same. He had opened the door for Cui, and he couldn't immediately push her away again—nor did he want to. After all, regardless of whatever was wrong with him, she really did need his help.

He cleared his throat. "Tell me, have you lived in Terrania for long, Cui?"

The young thief peered shyly over the edge of her cola bottle. She shook her head.

"And your parents? Are your mother and father here too?"

Another shake of the head.

"Do you have friends? Acquaintances? Anyone?"

She looked at him in silence for a moment, then shook her head again.

"But how did you come to Terrania? Can't you tell me anything about your past?"

Another head shake.

Bai Jun wasn't sure whether to feel anger or sympathy. Was the girl just being stubborn or was she really still so afraid of him that she didn't want to reveal a single thing? He tried good-natured teasing instead.

"What's wrong with you? Is shaking your head all you're capable of doing?"

She shook her head—and Bai Jun realized he had asked the question clumsily. But even after phrasing it differently, he had no more success. Cui remained uncommunicative. Other than the obvious, that she was a street kid without anyone to rely on, he wasn't able to elicit any information about her past.

At some point, he noticed that Lhundup had adjusted the rear-view mirror slightly and kept looking back at them with curiosity. His assistant could do so without any danger, as the streets to Terrania were well lit thanks to the brightly glowing masts running next to them, and the closest vehicle, a bus of visitors going home from the fusion reactor, was almost half a kilometer in front of them.

"Can I try?" Lhundup suddenly interjected.

Bai Jun looked at him with surprise. "By all means."

Lhundup flashed the turn signal and stopped at the side of the road. They were still about fifty kilometers from Terrania. He opened the driver's door, got out, and walked around the limousine. Then he opened the door next to Cui. An onslaught of ice-cold night air rushed into the heated car.

The short but sturdy man made an inviting gesture. "Get out, if you like," he said. "You can go. No one is keeping you here. If you don't want to be with us, if you don't want to talk to us, here's the way back to your old life."

Bai Jun couldn't help holding his breath. On any other night, this would have been a cruel choice. *Either you're nice to the two nice men or they'll let you freeze outside,* they seemed to be saying. January nights in the Gobi were bitterly cold, and so far out into the desert, Cui wouldn't find shelter anywhere.

Of course, the situation was quite different right now. A huge column of vehicles was following them from the Yinshan mountains to Terrania. No one would refuse to give a ride to a young hitchhiker.

Nonetheless, it was a meaningful ultimatum. Cui's gaze scurried

from Bai Jun to the open door and back again. The mayor schooled his face to neutrality. He hoped the cold would keep her from getting out because he didn't want to lose her again—especially not like this. But he understood that he had to give her the choice. She had to see that it would be better for her in here than out on the street.

Hesitantly, Cui swung a leg out of the car and leaned outside a little. Lhundup didn't stir; he just looked at her invitingly. Like an animal ready to bound away, the young thief hunched at the threshold of the darkness. She could disappear into it, vanish back into anonymity and out of the constraints Bai Jun might impose on her. But at the same time, cold and loneliness would await.

Cui immediately came to a decision. She grabbed the door handle, pulled her leg back, yanked the door closed, and slid over to Bai Jun in a quick motion. Seeking refuge, she nestled her skinny body against his.

He put an arm around her shoulders. Not like a far-too-old john would with a far-too-young prostitute, but like a father with his daughter.

"Thank you for staying with us," he said. "No one will do anything to you. I promise."

They kept driving, and to his astonishment, this event appeared to have broken the ice. Cui still didn't talk, but she also didn't pull away from him, instead laying her head on his shoulder. She fell asleep within ten minutes.

"How did you know what to do?" Bai Jun asked Lhundup.

Lhundup grinned. "My uncle Dalaimoc always says, 'If a guest doesn't appreciate your hearth, allow them to sleep outside.' And Cui seemed to need a reminder of how nice our hearth is."

Bai Jun smirked. "Your uncle is a clever man."

"Yes, he is," Lhundup agreed.

5.

The Nestmaster

Topsid

Eleven Weeks Remaining

"Come, Erikk-Mahnoli. Let us sit. Let us indulge and enjoy ourselves as if there's no tomorrow. And afterward, we'll discuss what happens if there's a tomorrow after all."

"Bismall-Kehn, the master of the Purple Nest, gestured sweepingly at the table. It was primarily covered with meat prepared in various manners: raw, roasted, on sticks and in slices, brown and smelling of spicy seasonings, pale and somewhat fibrous-looking. Two servants were there to serve the dishes. Accompanying it all was a kind of flatbread and a pot full of something that was either rice or boiled maggots.

"Thank you," Manoli said. "That's very kind of you. I don't know what I've done to deserve this honor." He sat at the one end of the table, his host at the other. With a flutter, the flying lizard leaped off Bismall-Kehn's shoulder and landed on a framework of tubes that could potentially be an example of Topsidian modern art.

"To be completely honest with you," said Bismall-Kehn, "you're receiving this honor because my curiosity to get to know you is greater than the cost of this meal."

"You could try to get information out of me in an entirely different way," Manoli said, thinking about the interrogation he had very likely gone through before his escape.

The Topsidan looked at him without the slightest stirring of his facial muscles. In general, Manoli had noticed that the lizards hardly changed their expressions at all. They seemed to convey emotion via head positioning—or even more so, subtle scents. "I suspect I know what you're getting at. You were a prisoner of the

military."

"Do you know something about it?" Manoli asked, surprised.

"I'm only drawing conclusions from what I can see." He made a dismissive gesture. "But let's talk about that later. First, we eat. I recommend the ssrilashar. It's exceptionally juicy today."

They loaded their plates full, although Bismall-Kehn dug in voraciously while Manoli took only tiny nibbles. Still, he did try some of every dish. In principle, he wasn't a picky eater and was open to everything Earth's cuisine had to offer. However, here he preferred to exercise caution. He didn't know how his metabolism would respond to the food.

"Don't be shy!" the Topsidan called to him from the other end of the table as he grabbed a hunk of meat and tossed it into his mouth. "I've only laid out dishes that are edible to Arkonides. There's nothing in it for me if you die of food poisoning."

I'm not an Arkonide, Manoli thought sourly. But on the outside, he showed an obliging smile and similarly shoved a piece of meat into his mouth.

To his surprise, most of the items proved entirely palatable. He left the raw meat to one side and the supposed rice was actually a kind of animal, which tasted quite acidic to boot. Beyond that, the Topsidans' cuisine reminded him of the delicacies he had sampled on visits to Turkey, Egypt, and the Middle East. It was similarly spicy, but thankfully, enough viscous juice was provided to soothe his burning throat.

"Your Topsidian is remarkably good," Bismall-Kehn noted in a clear attempt to initiate some small talk. "What are you using? Translator microbes? Hypno training? Speech software with a biotronic brain interface?"

"Uh…it's a tiny, specialized Positronic," Manoli revealed. "It's injected into the user's fatty tissue and then autonomously finds a suitable location in the body to latch onto the nervous system. In the learning phase, it analyzes audio samples. After that, the

translator reacts to the speaker's intentions. If they want to say something in a language they can speak themselves, the translator stays inactive. But if they want to say something in a language they haven't learned, it translates in real time and takes over their vocal tract. Naturally, it can only produce alien sounds that are within the realm of the user's vocal tract, so the possible applications aren't infinite."

"How unconventional," Bismall-Kehn adjudicated. "What will the Arkonides think of next? But not bad."

After eating a few more bites, Manoli asked a question of his own. "Could you tell me a little more about the place I'm in?"

"About the Purple Nest?"

"No. About the city where your…establishment is located. And about this planet."

"Establishment…" The Topsidan let out a hissing laugh. "What a lovely word. We're a bordello, Erikk-Mahnoli. A brothel! Aren't we, Kikerren?" He looked at the flying lizard, which replied with a caw and waggled its long head. Bismall-Kehn turned back to Manoli. "But *what* a brothel, I must add! There's none other like ours in all of Khir-Teyal."

"I can well believe that. One of your ladies, Khatleen-Tarr, showed me around a bit."

"Ah, Khatleen-Tarr…" The nestmaster let the name melt on his tongue like sweet ice cream. "Magnificent girl, isn't she? Simply captivating. She hasn't been here long, but she's already become a great asset to the nest. I hope she'll stay with us for a long time to come. But to answer your question: what do you already know about Topsid and Kerh-Onf?"

"Virtually nothing," Manoli admitted.

Bismall-Kehn smacked his lips. It sounded deflated. "Of course. In the end, we're just a race of social climbers somewhere at the edge of the Arkonide Grand Imperium. I shouldn't have expected

otherwise."

"You misunderstand," Manoli hurried to say. "As I mentioned to Khatleen-Tarr, I come from a small agrarian world within the Imperium and had pretty much nothing to do with galactic goings-on until recently. I'm a doctor, and spent my whole life treating colds and sprained ankles. Until I was kidnapped and wound up here somehow..."

Bismall-Kehn's tongue flickered with suspicion. "Aha," he said. He spread his arms out patronizingly. "Well, in that case, I'll gladly share a few words about my homeworld. Topsid is located in a star system with twenty-seven planets that orbit two suns, one white and one violet. Don't ask me for any of the astronomical details. I run a bordello, not an observatory."

Manoli smirked. The nestmaster was uncommonly jovial and witty. Nothing like the Topsidans he'd heard about from those who had witnessed the war in the Vega system.

Well, they were all military. Not exactly a group known for their sense of humor even on Earth.

"Topsid is the third of six planets that circle both stars," Bismall-Kehn continued. "The surface is divided up by four huge mountain ranges. Between them are vast plains. Our world is on the dry side, almost desert-like. There are no great oceans, only internal seas. Despite that, there's a light fog over the whole planet almost every day and night.

Manoli furrowed his brow. "That sounds pretty odd. The fog must have some kind of source."

"Oh, there's some scientific reason behind it, and back in the elementary academy, I even knew what it was. But I have better things to do than worry about something that's just how it is and doesn't affect my life. Do you ask why Arkonides don't have tails?"

"Every single day," Manoli said dryly.

Bismall-Kehn looked at him in stunned silence for two seconds.

Then he burst out laughing. “I like you! You’re not as stiff and arrogant as most of your people.”

“Tell me something about Kerh-Onf,” the doctor asked. “I heard it’s the capital city of Topsid.”

“The seat of the despot, yes. And also the largest city with the most important spaceport,” Bismall-Kehn confirmed. “It’s in close proximity to the Omzrak mountain range that borders the Groogwain plain, but without a map, that won’t mean much to you. About forty to fifty million Topsidans live in the city. No one knows exactly how many, not least because of places like Khir-Teyal.”

“And that’s the…red light district?” Manoli hesitantly inquired. He still had no real picture of where exactly he had ended up.

The Topsidan cocked his head. “Red light district?”

“A place with brothels and gambling dens engaging in trade that’s not entirely above board, and where the law enforcement agencies’ power isn’t as great as in other parts of the city.” Manoli wondered if the Grand Imperium even had places like that.

If not, Bismall-Kehn seemed to have just as little idea as Manoli did, as the nestmaster only inclined his head. “Ah! Red light district. Yes, that’s about right. Khir-Teyal is a place of the forbidden that doesn’t officially exist. The government and administration of Kerh-Onf ignore us, although there are raids now and then, of course. The area was once just a dirty plain used for the city’s wastewater runoff and depositing garbage.”

Bismall-Kehn croaked in disgust.

“At some point, however, the city’s population exploded, and more and more outcasts and criminals sought a home out here, a little removed from the despotate’s watchful eye. First, roasted meat stalls popped up, then gambling dens, bars, dueling chambers, mud bath houses, and bordellos. Khir-Teyal turned into its own city beyond the city, a shining caricature of Kerh-Onf, equal parts dark and multicolored. You can go underground here if you’re being searched for. If your life’s gone astray, you can make your fortune,

as long as you don't have too many scruples. And you'll find an early death, if you're not careful."

"That sounds like a red light district all right," Manoli muttered. "Or the next step after that, even."

"Red light district, eh?" A hissing chuckle left Bismall-Kehn's snout. "I'll have to keep note of that. A red light or two would suit the Purple Nest fairly well, I think."

They finished their meal amid more harmless chatter. When they were finally sitting in front of only their glasses, which a servant had filled with high-percentage berry wine as a digestif, Manoli's host grew noticeably more serious.

"During your stay on Topsid, you can stay here in the Nest as long as you like, Erikk-Mahnoli. No, wait, let me express that differently: I *strongly* advise that you remain within the Nest during your stay here on Topsid."

"That's very considerate of you, Bismall-Kehn, but that I can't do that. I'm looking for friends who went missing here."

"I thought you were kidnapped," the Topsidan replied.

He's right. Shit. "Oh, uh…that's true as well," he said hurriedly. "But I wasn't the first. Shortly beforehand, some of my friends disappeared without a trace. Taken off into space, supposedly. Since I ended up here after my kidnapping, I'm holding onto some hope that they're here too. I have to find them again."

Bismall-Kehn angled his head. "Well then. I'll help you as much as I can. I have contacts I can inquire with. And you can access public information sources from my office. But nonetheless, you cannot leave the Nest."

"That sounds an awful lot like I'm a prisoner," Manoli remarked. A hint of suspicion crept into his voice.

His host made a dismissive gesture. "You're misreading my motive. And clearly, you also don't recognize the danger you're in on Topsid."

“You’re alluding to the fact that Arkonides aren’t especially well-liked around here?”

“That’s quite the understatement! Most Topsidans—those associated with the despot most of all—hate them. We’re a young spacefaring species, having only ventured into space a few generations ago. At the same time, we’re proud and ambitious. We expect our galactic neighbors to take us seriously. Arkon does not. We’re seen as upstarts, punished with contempt, and hindered in our urge to settle new planets.”

Manoli couldn’t help thinking of the Vega system. If the Topsidans’ idea of “settling” actually amounted to conquering, he could understand the Arkonides’ point of view. Naturally, he held back from expressing that out loud.

“That’s led to a fairly frosty atmosphere between our two cultures,” Bismall-Kehn continued. “Which means the life of one individual Arkonide on Topsid isn’t worth much. Either he’ll suffer an unfortunate accident in the middle of the street or he’ll be caught by the authorities and disappear to some unknown place, never to be seen again. Or, worst of all, he’ll end up in some private menagerie. I cannot and will not allow that, Erikk-Mahnoli. That’s why you must hide here and not show yourself to anyone. I trust those in my service. You have nothing to fear from them. But you mustn’t let even the guests see you, because one of them would call the authorities before you knew it. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Very clearly,” Manoli growled. This wasn’t how he had pictured things going.

Bismall-Kehn bobbed his head. “I understand if you’re unsatisfied. But you have to believe me, it’s what’s best for all of us. Don’t worry—we can search for your friends very thoroughly even from here. And when we find them, I’ll arrange secret passage away from Topsid for you all. I promise.”

With a resigned nod, Manoli gave his agreement. He recognized that Bismall-Kehn was only worried about his well-being…which raised a not insignificant question. “Why are you helping me? It’s

anything but risk-free for you."

The nestmaster laughed softly. "Maybe because I'm cleverer than most of my people. Or maybe because I'm stupider."

6.

Good News and Bad News

Terrania

January 6, 2037

Golden morning light flooded the conference room on the Stardust Tower's forty-ninth floor, directly below the administrator's office. Just like that office, this room where the Terran Union's Inner Council met for its weekly meeting had large panoramic windows wrapping around its entire circumference, giving a breathtaking view of the growing city.

In the left half of the room stood the circular conference table that had space for Adams, the council's eight coordinators, and Bai Jun as mayor of Terrania. In the right half, the on-site catering team had set up a light buffet to make the men and women's stressful work as top world leaders and representatives of Terra somewhat more comfortable. Every week, the chefs came up with something new. Today, if Bai Jun wasn't mistaken, French-Italian cuisine was on the menu.

The mayor hadn't slept enough last night. Owing to the presence of Cui, who had been quartered in the guest bedroom, he'd barely caught a wink. Instead, he had spent the whole time asking himself what the hell he was doing—and what he should do next.

For now, however, his duties were keeping him busy. He had left the girl in Lhundup's care that morning and floated up the tower to the conference room via the anti-grav shaft. Most of the others had already arrived. Administrator Adams was chatting to Allan D. Mercant, the former US Homeland Security agent who now held the post of security coordinator. Some of the media had commented on this with a certain degree of sarcasm. However, it could not be denied that—regardless of his past—Mercant had put Terran interests above those of his homeland since the *Stardust*'s landing in the Gobi. In terms of legitimacy, this put him a few key weeks

ahead of Bai Jun.

Across the room, busying themselves at the buffet, were former NASA flight director and now space coordinator, Lesly K. Pounder, and the Brazilian Nobel Peace Prize winner, Lygia Cielo. Until a few weeks ago, Cielo had still been making international headlines as a star reporter and human rights advocate, until the Brazilian president had personally put her forward for the Inner Council, particularly the office of coordinator for culture and humanitarian affairs.

A little farther left, at the window, stood William Tifflor, the famous defense attorney who had represented Crest last July at his show trial in Washington. He now served the Terran Union as coordinator for justice and human rights. As usual, he had a cup of coffee in his hand and was speaking quietly into his pod as he conferenced with a contact somewhere in the world.

Three steps past him, Élodie Marceau, the coordinator for economics and finances, was leaning against the glass of the panoramic window. A coffee in her right hand and a pod in her left made the slim, colorfully dressed Frenchwoman—a former board member of the European Central Bank—the female mirror image of Tifflor.

Bai Jun watched Mercant pull himself away from Adams and come strolling over to him. “Good morning, Mayor. How was the opening ceremony last night?” His tone sounded jovial and unforced. However, when talking to the squat man, whose almost youthfully taught face struck a curious contrast with his white wreath of hair and otherwise bald head, Bai Jun could never quite shake the feeling of being sized up. Maybe it came down to them both having worked for various security organizations in their respective countries.

“It was a spectacular event,” Bai Jun replied. “I had the sense it was a few degrees colder up in the mountains than in Terrania, but that didn’t bother the crowd. The excitement over the new fusion reactor outweighed it. And the light show at the end of Adams’s speech gave Guanghui a more than impressive debut.”

“I heard that you were accompanied not only by your assistant, but also a young lady,” said Adams. “A friend of yours?”

A new wave of suspicion surged through Bai Jun. There was presumably nothing deeper to this question at all, but he felt like he was being spied on.

He nodded. “Yes. Her name’s Cui, and she arrived in Terrania only recently. The poor thing is suffering. She lost her parents and has no one else left.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Hopefully she’s doing well.”

“As well as can be expected. She’s from the provinces and isn’t used to a city like Terrania. That’s made her a little shy at the moment. But I’m sure she’ll adapt soon enough. She’s currently living with Lhundup and me.”

Behind Bai Jun, the remaining three coordinators, Kareena Chopra, Maui John Ngata, and Fredrik Dahlgren stepped out of the anti-grav shaft. Adams registered their arrival with a satisfied nod. He waited another moment for the three to get themselves drinks, then he called the group to order.

“All the best to your young acquaintance,” Mercant said before making his way to his seat.

“Thanks!” Bai Jun replied.

“Welcome to the sixteenth meeting of the Inner Council of the Terran Union,” Adams greeted them all once they had sat down. “In the last few weeks, we’ve been able to chalk up a major success with the commissioning of Guanhui 1, which should have a decidedly positive effect on Terrania’s further development. I hope you’re all ready for the new luxury that the lifting of energy rationing has brought with it.”

“I just ordered a big new holo-TV,” Pounder interjected with a grin.

“Then we’ll all be inviting ourselves over to your place in the not-too-distant future,” Adams retorted.

The exchange was met with approving laughter.

“Let’s get down to business, ladies and gentlemen: the weekly reports.” The administrator nodded at William Tifflor. “Over to you, Mr. Tifflor.”

“Thank you, Administrator.” The coordinator for justice and human rights repositioned the tablet that contained his records. “I’ve again spent most of the week at the International Court of Justice in the Hague. The latest world law amendment is well underway. The plans to reform the International Court of Justice into the World Court of the Terran Union are also as good as finished. Collaboration with President Donnifer’s staff is going swimmingly, if I do say so myself.”

“Glad to hear it,” Adams replied.

“In contrast, the implementation of human rights in member states of the Terran Union is still proving somewhat difficult,” Tifflor continued. “On the one hand, the Terran Union is an amalgamation of highly distinct cultural groups and state entities. Their understanding of individual rights and duties—such as those of the United States, China, and the African Federation—is so different in places that we’re still debating fundamental matters. On top of this is the fact that we’ve assured the member states of broad autonomy. We cannot, for example, take direct action against individual violations, only insist on compliance with the charter they’ve adopted in principle.”

One after another, the coordinators gave their reports, describing advances and setbacks in their respective fields. Mercant remarked with satisfaction that the Terran Union wasn’t endangered from within anymore. The internal autonomy it granted to the member states provided little scope for friction from nationalists.

Dahlgren, a Dane and the coordinator for science and technology, introduced the new Evernet database, SCIENTIA, where the results of research into alien technology would be made available to all member states in one central location going forward. “It’s the only way to guarantee simultaneous worldwide progress,” he explained in conclusion. “And that will benefit all of

humanity."

Pounder reported that the construction of a space academy in the former Russian spaceport Baikonur was going according to plan. "Soon, we'll be able to train the first generation of young astronauts there," he said with a measure of pride in his voice.

"While we're on the subject of space," interjected Chopra, coordinator for administration and budget, in a soft voice, "I have a question, if it's all right. Has the *Tosoma* expedition reported in yet?"

Barely a week ago, the Arkonide spacecraft salvaged from the depths of the Atlantic had set out with Rhodan, Bull, Crest, and Thora on board. They meant to travel to Arkon, in the heart of the Grand Imperium, which lay thirty-four thousand light-years away in globular cluster M 13—an unimaginable distance for the human mind. Crossing it would have been a pipe dream mere months ago.

Accompanying them were, among others, the Ilt called Gucky; the mutants Ras Tschubai, Tako Kakuta, Tatiana Michalovna, Wuriu Sengu, Anne Sloane, and John Marshall; a crew of four hundred; and eighteen hundred passengers—scientists, scholars, and artists from all nations with whom Rhodan hoped to make an impression on Arkon.

"No," Pounder replied, shaking his head. "But we expected that. The *Tosoma*'s hypercom equipment has a range of only ninety light-years, putting it out of range after only the first transition. Also, even with constant jumps and a recharging time of twenty hours, they could have traveled thirty-six hundred light-years in the past five days at best. That still puts them far outside the Grand Imperium's network of hypercom relay stations. Contact will only be possible once they get close enough, and that's only if one of the Imperium's forward relay stations is positioned close enough to Earth, which we can't assume."

"Understood," said Chopra.

Bai Jun knew that a brother of the Indian woman, a mathematician, was on the *Tosoma.* He understood her concern. As

did Adams, who intervened with a fatherly air.

“Don’t worry, Miss Chopra. It’ll all go smoothly out there. The ship is packed full of specialists, not least Crest and Thora.” He nodded at Pounder. “Please continue with your report, Mr. Pounder.”

Bai Jun was distracted by his pod blinking. Another notification from his contacts. Last night, after Cui had retired into the guest room, he had sent a few messages to old friends and asked them to find out for him where she came from and what had happened to her family.

But although these men were absolute professionals in the art of information gathering, and had even put together an astoundingly comprehensive dossier about Lhundup the shepherd, their skills seemed to have failed them here. Bai Jun had already received two responses with no success. This was the third, as he found when he called up the incoming message. It was as if Cui hadn’t existed until yesterday.

Bai Jun furrowed his brow. That simply couldn’t be. Everyone left traces behind—in the Hukou system, i.e. the official household registration system used in the People’s Republic; in the official school board register; with the financial authorities; with health insurance companies, banks, and Evernet shopping platforms; and on social networks. The only exceptions were the truly illegal ones who were born on the street, grew up there, slipped into criminality at a young age, then ended up in the hands of a gang or in the back rooms of brothels. These people usually left behind only one entry in the authorities’ records: that of an unidentified corpse found in a dumpster in some dark alley deep in the slums on the edges of Hong Kong, Shenyang, or Guangzhou.

Or in Hohhot... The thought flashed through Bai Jun’s mind as the image of the young women he’d had to kill appeared before him again. The one who looked so similar to Cui.

While Pounder finished his report and Élodie Marceau began her update on the current world economic situation, the mayor’s pod blinked again.

Letting me know about another failure, Bai Jun thought somberly. But he was surprised. The sender had hidden their address. From the look of things, this wasn't one of Bai Jun's contacts.

He opened the message—and felt his innards involuntary cramping up.

We know what you did to the girl, it said. *You are a murderer!*

Alarmed and a little bewildered, Bai Jun stared at the short missive. What the hell did it mean? And why had he received it today? It couldn't be a coincidence.

"What's the matter?" Adams asked, worried.

Bai Jun jerked to attention. He hadn't noticed that he had drawn the others' gazes. Sheepishly clearing his throat, he stood up.

"It's... It's just a private message," he said. "Please excuse me."

As quickly as etiquette permitted, he fled into the anti-grav shaft.

The second message arrived before he had even left the anti-grav shaft. It consisted of just two pieces of information and a demand: *4 p.m., Café Stellaris. Come alone.*

He had no doubt who this communication came from. It was the mysterious figure who knew a few very delicate details about his past—or was able to very effectively imply such knowledge.

Bai Jun looked at the pod's time display. He still had a few hours left until the appointed time—more than enough to speculate about who was behind the ominous messages, what they intended, and how he should respond.

There was the obvious approach, of course. The mayor had enough trustworthy contacts in the city, former officers he could set upon the person who wanted to meet him at Café Stellaris. On the other hand, such an action might be premature. He didn't know his enemy yet and couldn't gauge them. However, based on the highly specific information possessed by the opponent in question, Bai Jun

suspected they were a secret agent from the People's Republic of China. Who else would know about his deployment in Hohhot and how it had played out?

Or they hacked into the secret service archives, he thought. In principle, that was basically impossible. But over the last few months, more and more alien technology had made its way onto the open market—and, what's more, the global black market—which meant he couldn't rule out some hacker having gotten hold of Arkonide computer algorithms that let them simply bypass Earth's firewall technology. The uncontrolled worldwide spread of alien knowledge didn't only have advantages for civilization, regardless of how Dahlgren saw it. It also held grave dangers—for instance, when people with criminal intent made discoveries that Earth's authorities could do nothing to counteract.

This line of thinking gets me nowhere, Bai Jun observed as he stepped out of the shaft and walked to his office to take a moment to breathe. *So I'll just find this café later and listen to what these guys actually want first.*

He sat in his chair, activated his computer, and sent a message to Adams to excuse himself from the rest of the meeting. Then he looked up Café Stellaris's address. Finally, he wrote up a message scheduled in advance to be sent to Lhundup's pod, which would explain the situation if he hadn't returned by 5 p.m.

After making these preparations, he tried to pass the time before his appointment with routine work. There was a lot to do in Terrania. Annoyingly, he found it quite difficult to focus on anything. He was grateful when the clock finally showed half past three, allowing him to set out on his way.

Café Stellaris was a small, recently opened establishment on Terrania's southern edge. The building had a square base that transitioned into a transparent dome about one meter up, the structure revealing its Ferron origins. The transparency was separated into several regions that could be separately controlled by a computer program and individually darkened.

Right now, they were fully transparent, providing a clear view of all the guests. The furnishings were made of silver and blue molded plastic and clearly came from Chinese mass production. From the dome's metal beams hung small model spacecraft. A few ferns, which the owner had decorated with silver glitter as befitting the café's name, were accompanied by modular screens with imprints of constellations. Together, these gave a semblance of privacy.

A curved sign reading "Café Stellaris" hung above the entrance. White LEDs blinked against its black background. Seeing all this, "enthusiastic" was the word that came to mind. And that was the kindest description he could think of for this place.

He stepped through the door, which was modeled after a spacecraft's airlock hatch, and was greeted by ambient digital music. CosmoTrance was the name of this new genre that had gained increasing popularity in the last half-year, no doubt spurred by humanity's first serious venture into space. To Bai Jun's ears, it sounded like two chimpanzees screeching at each other in slow motion.

It was surprisingly warm inside the café. Although the dome could only be a millimeter thick at most, it perfectly guarded against the icy winter cold. The guests appeared to like that. Some of them were even sitting at the small tables in T-shirts.

Bai Jun chose a table next to one of the decorative plants on the left-hand side. From there, he had a good overview of the whole room, and wasn't too far from the kitchen door in case he needed to flee. Putting on a consciously relaxed demeanor, he leaned back and studied the menu. No one needed to know that conspiratorial reasons had led him here.

Despite being Terrania's mayor, he could still move among the people unnoticed. Everyone in the city knew people like Perry Rhodan, Reginald Bull, or the Arkonide Crest da Zoltral. But Bai Jun was one of the unsung heroes. If he dressed unassumingly, as he had now, he blended in with the mass of other Chinese people populating Terrania.

A waitress with northern European features came over and asked

what he wanted. To his joy, Bai Jun realized that she was speaking Terranian. Ever more people were trying to learn the newly created, universal artificial language. That gave him hope for the future.

The mayor ordered a tea and received it promptly. For a while, he sat alone at the table and observed the clientele. He wondered if one of them was his mysterious message writer—and how many of the others belonged to their reinforcements.

Suddenly, a woman entered. She was Chinese and about forty, wearing the plain suit of a mid-level employee. Her gaze was innocent, her movements equally so. He could have taken her for a secretary or paralegal seeking a little relaxation after work. Nevertheless, the hair on the back of his neck stood on end when he saw her.

His intuition didn't deceive him. Without haste, but with clear purpose, the new arrival made a beeline for his table and sat with him uninvited.

"I hope you're having a pleasant day, honored general." The velvety voice matched the attractive woman's dark, delicate features.

Bai Jun narrowed his eyes a touch. "You're mistaken. I'm a mayor now."

A smile danced at the corners of her mouth. "Correct. How things change. A few short months ago, you were one of China's most distinguished officers. Now you're a toothless tiger on the leash of old men from the West."

Bai Jun's expression darkened. "I hope you didn't summon me here to insult me. Besides, the implication behind your words is absurd. Everyone on the council was voted into their positions in a fully legitimate manner, just as I was voted mayor of Terrania."

"Everyone on the council..." The woman let the words hang meaningfully in the air for a moment. "And yet, there are three Americans, not to mention the administrator himself—all close companions of Perry Rhodan, also an American, who is currently

leading an expedition to Arkon with his second in command, Reginald Bull—American. And what about John Marshall, who leads the Lakeside Institute, where Rhodan's mutants have gathered? Where is he from? That's right: America."

The waitress came over, and the woman ordered a mineral water.

"Are you going somewhere with this list of names?" Bai Jun asked once the waitress had gone again.

She leaned forward, and her soft voice gained acerbity. "I am indeed. You must see it, *Mayor.* The beautiful new world, this Terra that Perry Rhodan has bestowed upon us, is nothing more than a relapse into the twentieth century, when America believed it could force all other states into its political hegemony. This so-called Terran Union is pure window dressing—shadow puppetry in a tent outside the walls of Terrania. All the empires on Earth that were great and powerful until just recently—China, India, Russia—suddenly find themselves reduced to lackeys and stooges of Western masters. Exactly that, and nothing else, is what men like Rhodan, Adams, Mercant, and Pounder had in mind when they founded this bizarre contract of a city in the middle of the desert, this fata morgana of a real worldwide community."

Involuntarily, her hands balled into fists on the table. Her emotions were clearly running away from her, making her lose her professional distance. Bai Jun wondered what personal tragedy lay behind it.

The waitress came and brought the water.

"Thank you," his companion said with a mask of amiable courtesy on her face. No sooner were they alone than she continued, hissing and markedly fiercer. "And look at what state our home is in. What a radiant empire China was! Thanks to Perry Rhodan, millions of people have died in riots. Alien technology is destroying our own. Visitors from the stars like those Fantan last summer feel welcome to steal from us and desecrate our cultural artifacts. They have reduced us—including you, Bai Jun—to mere caretakers, while the real decisions are made by Americans in space

and at the top of that Stardust Tower. That is intolerable!"

"Are you finally done?" he asked, indignant. He was furious. On the one hand, he'd had enough of listening to this kind of whining from people who were only concerned about their own well-being and longed for the "good old days." And on the other hand, the woman had aroused something in him that he thought he'd moved past: suspicion.

Was there something to her words? Had men like the great administrator Adams, an ultra-rich US industry magnate, and security coordinator Mercant, an erstwhile Homeland Security agent, snuck their way to the top to reforge the world in the spirit of the USA, using the Terran Union as a cover?

No, dammit! Don't let yourself be drawn in, he thought. *This woman is just spraying her mind poison.*

"Yes," she said, meanwhile. "I'm finished for the moment." She'd regained her composure, and as she drank her water, mild conceit found her features again.

"Excellent. Then perhaps you'll finally deign to tell me what this meeting is about!"

"You still can't figure it out?" the woman asked. "We don't want the future to be under a star-spangled banner. The Terran Union needs strong leadership. To that end, China must win back its former strength, not only as a nation, but also as a force within Terrania."

"Who is 'we'?"

The woman shook her head, smiling. "One thing at a time. But this I can tell you for certain: we're the good guys. And we want you to join forces with us. For you to be our bridgehead in this enemy territory."

"Bridgehead?" Bai Jun snorted. "That sounds dangerously like a military coup. It sounds as though you want me to sabotage Perry Rhodan's vision for you. What are you expecting? That I have

Adams assassinated? That I bribe the lawmakers to make myself administrator? Or force Pounder to relinquish the *Nesbitt-Breck* to me?"

"We'll tell you your assignment when the time comes."

Bai Jun leaned back and crossed his arms. "And what if I refuse? If I don't want to play along with this perfidious game?"

She put her hands together and made an innocent face. "Then it might be that certain information about your past is made public. You already know: your love of knives and young girls. I wonder what your American friends would make of that—Mercant and such—let alone all the good citizens here in Terrania."

Bai Jun felt his innards contracting. Anger and shame burned inside him, along with fear that all the trust he had painstakingly built up could vanish in an instant. "You... You..." He was lost for words.

"Oh, and speaking of knives and young girls...how do you like your new playmate?"

"Cui?" All of a sudden, he grasped the truth and turned ice cold. "You put her in my path, didn't you?"

The woman nodded. "We thought it would bring you joy to save a little street whore to atone for taking the life of another. But we can also take her away from you again. The knife for her sweet throat is at the ready."

"I'll kill you," Bai Jun uttered through gritted teeth. His whole body tensed. He was on the verge of leaping for her right there in the café and choking her with his bare hands.

"Calm down, General. None of this needs to happen. Everything will be grand: for us, for China, for you, for Cui, even for your beloved Terran Union. If you put yourself on the right side. You have until tomorrow morning to think it over."

With that, the woman stood up, nodded again as a goodbye, and left.

7.

Hot-Blooded and Cold-Blooded

Topsid

Eight Weeks Remaining

Manoli spent the next three weeks in the Purple Nest. With the aid of a Topsidian timepiece, he managed to calculate an approximate comparison to Earth's timekeeping, simply counting Earth seconds using the familiar system of counting from one to thirty and then comparing that span of time with the time that had passed on the clock. For safety, he also measured his resting pulse in the morning and marked one Earth minute after sixty beats—he'd maintained that reading for years. The result might have been imperfect, but it was good enough for his needs.

Through these efforts, he learned not only that a day on Topsid was almost exactly one hour longer than on Earth, but also that the Topsidans used a base twelve number system instead of base ten.

In Earth's counting system, the Topsidian minute consisted of six twelve-second blocks, i.e. seventy-two seconds. The same applied to an hour, which thus contained seventy-two minutes or 5,184 seconds. Curiously, a day was divided into two sets of twelve, just as on Earth, and amounted to 124,416 seconds—roughly 34.5 Earth hours. Manoli was puzzled for a while that it nonetheless only lasted twenty-five, until he realized this was because "one second" was a shorter period of time for Topsidans than for humans.

All the while, he respected Bismall-Kehn's stipulation: he didn't go outside and he hid himself from the Purple Nest's clientele. He spent the majority of each day in the small room he'd been allocated, where he used data files and the planet's entertainment media to study Topsidian culture and used the local equivalent of Evernet to search for traces of Crest or Rhodan's expedition groups.

His search remained fruitless. However, something else stood out

to him. It appeared that something was brewing on Topsid—indeed, within the entire Topsidian despotate. So far, the species had been steeply ascending as an up-and-coming spacefaring people. Aside from the Arkonides' general displeasure, not much had hindered them in discovering new worlds and taking possession of them.

The Vega invasion seemed to be the Topsidans' first big military defeat since they had started traveling to the stars. Following this disaster, their domestic politics, too, were heading towards a crisis. If Manoli was interpreting the reports correctly, a growing body of people wanted drastic changes within the despotate. However, the political opposition's views of what should be done appeared to be split into two.

"That's correct," Bismall-Kehn confirmed to him as they shared a meal. "The opposition is fragmented. On one side are the 'hot-bloods.' Their takeaway from the Vega disaster is that Topsid must better arm itself in order to face its enemies and any other adversity out there in space with more force. I'm sure you can imagine that, above all, the military leadership adheres to this doctrine."

"Weird," Manoli said. "I always thought the Topsidans were more on the chilly side."

"That's a misapprehension, Erikk-Mahnoli. As you've no doubt read by now, we are ectothermic. That applies to both our bodies and our minds. We can be very hot-blooded when we want to. And we downright love heat. Why do you think the Purple Nest is such a lucrative business?" The nestmaster laughed hissingly. "But," he continued, "your 'cold-bloods' exists as well. They preach moderation, even believing that military strength gives a false sense of security. In their eyes, it leads to irresponsible ventures like the one in the Vega system—and sooner or later ensures a confrontation with an opponent we can't measure up to."

"Let me guess," Manoli said. "Arkon."

Bismall-Kehn inclined his green-scaled head. "Aside from that, the principal question is whether military expansion can work as a long-term solution. Doubtless, a certain degree of strength is needed for our neighbors to take us seriously. But sooner or later,

diplomacy and cooperation have to replace competition or we risk losing everything we've gained."

"Is that your point of view?" Manoli asked, curious.

"That's what the 'cold-bloods' think," Bismall-Kehn replied, and his lizard face remained unreadable.

Khatleen-Tarr saw Manoli relatively rarely in these weeks. Since the Purple Nest's business hours continued deep into the night, she tended to sleep in very late, as did the other girls. After that, she focused on personal grooming or sewing new clothes with the others—the Topsidian mating ritual seemed to involve a great deal of wear and tear.

Sometimes, she also went out into Khir-Teyal, always leaving the house in disguise, as if she feared being recognized on the street. And, occasionally, Manoli found her just crouching by the window in her room, staring into the distance. Once, he made the mistake of speaking to her, and she hissed at him that he should leave her in peace.

Out of boredom, Manoli began to take on simple serving duties in the Purple Nest in the fourth week of his stay there. He somehow had the feeling that he owed Bismall-Kehn for his hospitality. He wiped floors, polished statues, and replaced egg-shaped cushions in the parlor, just as if he were one of the other four male servants who kept the bordello in good order.

In addition, he started to learn about Topsidian anatomy and confirmed that his initial assumptions had been right. Topsidans secreted different scents depending on mood, which the others could perceive by flicking their tongues. The many flagons of water on the dressing table in Khatleen-Tarr's room didn't serve only to provide a pleasant fragrance, but also to mask or enhance her own body's pheromones.

"We have to use these fragrances," she explained when he asked her one day. "Nothing would kill a john's mood more than knowing that we're not sexually aroused during mating." She tilted her head

questioningly. “How is it among you Arkonides?”

Manoli gave her a wry grin. “Love for money is the same all over the galaxy, I’m sure,” he theorized. “Where I’m from, the prostitutes don’t use any pheromones. But a hefty degree of acting is involved, I believe.” He wanted to say something else, but he stopped there.

Khatleen-Tarr’s forked tongue darted forward, and she laughed softly. “But I can taste it, Erikk-Mahnoli. You’re curious.” She leaned forward, eyes glittering cheerfully. “After living so long in the Purple Nest, you want to know *how it works* for us Topsidans.” She slowly stroked his cheek with a manicured claw. “What do you think? Would you like to watch, maybe? For you it would even be free.”

“What?” Manoli jerked back and felt himself reddening. “No. That wouldn’t be decent. I’m not a voyeur!”

Khatleen-Tarr laughed again. “You’re funny, Erikk-Mahnoli. I’m sitting with a john in the nesting room, one who—with a little luck—I don’t find too disgusting, and I’m paid to delude him into thinking I’m having fun mating with him, which in reality bores me as much as assembling beam weapons on a factory assembly line. Do you honestly believe I’d be bothered by an Arkonide belly slicer who wants to do a little field research? Actually, I’d find it quite funny. The idea of some sleazy Topsidian bureaucrat who sees me as a piece of meat exposing himself in front of an Arkonide like that...” She snickered roughly. “That would turn the tables.”

“I... I still don’t know,” Manoli murmured softly. “Call me a prude, but somehow I’m the son of my Catholic mother. I think I’d find it embarrassing.”

With one quick motion, the Topsidan undid the clasp of her airy garment, and the material sank to the ground with a rustle. Naked, she took a step back, raised her arms halfway, and looked at him challengingly. Her lithe, brown-scaled skin gleamed in the midday sun’s rays gleaming through the wooden shutters. “What do you see?” she asked him.

“Um...in what sense?”

“What do you see?”

“A woman?” he said cautiously.

“No.” Kathleen-Tarr turned her head to the side. Her voice sounded sober. “You see a lizard that walks on two legs. Just like I see a primate that walks on two legs. Even if I think you’re a nice man, we’re so physically alien to one another that we feel nothing when we stand naked in front of each other.” She went to her knees and picked up her tunic to get dressed again.

When she raised her hand to refasten the buckle, Manoli stepped forward and held it up. “That’s not true,” he said softly. Khatleen-Tarr’s skin felt firmer than that of humans, was pleasantly warm, and the scales gave it a fascinating structure.

Slowly, Manoli fastened the buckle for her. As he did, he looked at the Topsidan with a serious expression.

“You’re not just a lizard walking on two legs to me, Khatleen-Tarr. Not just a curious animal that can miraculously speak and fly into space in a starship. True, I may not feel the urge to mate with you when I see you unclothed before me. But I still see a woman, and a very beautiful one, in fact. Just so that’s clear.”

For a brief moment, the Topsidan simply stared at Manoli. She darted her tongue in and out as if to assure herself that he wasn’t pulling her leg.

“You’re unusually compassionate for an Arkonide, Erikk-Mahnoli,” she finally answered. She lowered her snout a little and looked at him impishly from half-closed lids. “Come to my nesting room tomorrow night.”

With no small amount of inner reservation, Manoli reported to Khatleen-Tarr the next evening. He noticed that she had increased the temperature in her room quite a bit. A hot night was in store—literally, it seemed.

“Hide in the bathroom and don’t make a sound. If the client

notices you, we'll be in big trouble, and that's if we're lucky."

She chuckled. As before, the whole thing still seemed to be a splendid joke to her. Manoli, on the other hand, felt a little like a teenager whose friends had convinced him to make his first visit to a brothel.

Take it in with the eyes of a scientist, he admonished himself as he followed her order and stepped through the beaded curtain. *You might be the only human who ever gets a chance to study Topsidans' mating behavior—even if it is being paid for. And it's better to accept an invitation to observe in the field than put two individuals under the microscope in a cage or laboratory.*

"Now, I don't want to hear a hiss out of you," Khatleen-Tarr impressed upon him again.

Manoli nodded silently, then she left the room.

It was just under half an hour before she came back, this time with company. Her client was a corpulent Topsidan with charcoal-gray scales and a wide snout. He was wearing a blue suit, though its shirt-like undergarment was half open, and was carrying a bulbous jug with a tubular spout from which he took a mighty gulp every so often.

"Ah, it's wonderfully warm in here," he remarked with pleasure as he looked around the room. "That makes the blood rush through my veins."

"I knew you would like it, Chon-Doh," Khatleen-Tarr said.

"Let's go to the nest right now, my hot-blooded lizard," the man urged. He put the jug on a side table, put his arms around Khatleen-Tarr's hips, and nudged her boisterously with his wide snout.

Suddenly, though, he stopped, raised his head, and darted his tongue in and out. "It smells strange in your nesting room," he growled. "Putrid somehow."

Manoli felt himself breaking out into a sweat. Had the Topsidan noticed him? *Stay calm,* he thought. *The guy won't know what a*

human smells like.

"Maybe the servant didn't clean well enough this morning," Khatleen-Tarr hissed alluringly as she untangled herself from Chon-Doh's grasp. "I'll have them castigated. But in the meantime, I have *this*." She reached for one of the flagons on her dressing table and sprinkled some of the colorless essence into the air. "This'll whet your appetite."

He flicked his tongue again, then laughed roughly. "Oh, yes. I like that a lot. I sense the ever-growing urge to rub my scales against yours."

"Not so turbulent, my powerful one," Khatleen-Tarr said, holding him back. "Slowly. We want to have our fun." She undid the buckle on her clothing and let it glide to the floor.

Chon-Doh tried to reach for her again, but she playfully slapped his fingers with a manicured claw. "Don't touch yet," she said as she turned around, her tail swinging provocatively, and eyed her scent flagons again.

The man began to tear off his clothes. As he did so, he repeatedly darted his tongue in Khatleen-Tarr's direction. Manoli saw that his pupils had narrowed and the yellow irises now formed a distinct ring.

Kathleen-Tarr cast the man a seductive gaze over her shoulder. "You like it really hot, don't you?" she asked, waving a slender flagon.

"I want us both to bathe in lava," he replied, voracious.

"My nest will be a volcano for you," she promised him. She uncorked the bottle, poured a little of the liquid onto her hand, and rubbed herself with it in slow movements over her neck and abdomen.

"Give it here!" her john demanded, then he tore the flagon away from her and poured a sizable dose of the fragrance onto his own wide chest before heedlessly throwing it aside. "Now come to me."

His voice was a dark rumble, the desire in it unmistakable.

He tried to grab her, but she again pulled her hand away and slapped his aside. Something sparkled in her eyes that was either rage or a challenge. Manoli couldn't say for sure. But since her next quick step led to the edge of the bed, where she waited invitingly, he assumed that the repelling blows were part of foreplay.

"You're acting stubborn," the man called, laughing. "Very nice. It'll make it all the more pleasurable to conquer you. Because that's what you really want, isn't it? To be subjugated by a strong man?" He grabbed Khatleen-Tarr, effortlessly lifted her into the air, and threw her onto the bed. Somewhat laboriously, he mounted her.

"Oh, yes," she hissed. "Show me how strong a tail-dragger like you really is. Vanquish me, if you can." She pulled his arm away, and as he fell heavily into the cushions, she rolled on top of him, quick as a flash. "Or is it me who will vanquish you?" With a soft laugh, she bent forward and flickered her tongue at his chest.

Snarling, the man pulled his right arm back, then punched her in the head with it. Khatleen-Tarr was flung aside. "Don't insult me!" he cried as he picked himself up. "I'm in charge here!"

The prostitute snarled. "Temper yourself a little, powerful one. Don't forget where you are."

"Be quiet!" he snapped at her with unexpected ferocity. "I paid for you, now I'm allowed to have my fun with you." He grabbed her and held her tightly by the upper arms. "There are supposed to be no taboos in the Purple Nest. Every man's dream comes true here. We'll see about that." He wound up and struck her again.

"Are you on drugs or something?" She began to struggle beneath him and bit him on the wrist.

"Miserable nest defiler," he snapped at her, delivering a third blow to her head. At the same time, he tried to force her thighs apart with his tail and legs.

Manoli wasn't sure, but he had the disquieting feeling that the

love game was threatening to get seriously out of hand. *Should I intervene or not?* Not that he could even do much against a lizard twice his size.

"No! Stop! This isn't funny anymore." Khatleen-Tarr tried to fight back, but the man's weight gave her little recourse in her present situation.

"Very nice," he hissed. "Beg for me to stop. Maybe I'll be merciful enough to do so. Only after we've really brought this nest to boiling point, of course." He raised his wide hand again.

Ugh, dammit! thought Manoli. Then he jumped up and resolutely stepped through the beaded curtain. "That's enough!" he shouted, raising his fists.

The john snarled in horror and spun around. "What in the name of the Pale Brothers... An Arkonide?!" He turned back to Khatleen-Tarr. "What is a pale-skin doing h—"

He didn't make it any further, because at that moment, the Topsidan woman's small but powerful fist connected with him. "Yes, an Arkonide. My personal Arkonide bodyguard, if you will."

"You bitch!" Chan-Doh bellowed, then jerked his head downward to deliver a powerful blow to Khatleen-Tarr's snout. Next, he jumped up and vaulted over the edge of the bed with shocking agility for his girth. "And now your turn, pale-skin."

In the meantime, Manoli had run all the way across the room and grabbed the chair from in front of Khatleen-Tarr's dressing table. He lifted it threateningly into the air. "Don't do anything you'll regret!" he warned.

The Topsidan laughed. "Such a cocky pipsqueak." Without fear, he marched towards Manoli.

The doctor brought the chair hurtling down. But his opponent merely raised his left arm and repelled the blow. He grabbed the chair, tore it out of Manoli's hands, and threw it across the room. Then he reached out his powerful arms to seize the human.

Manoli ducked and tried to scurry past his opponent. Unfortunately, he didn't quite manage it. A six-fingered hand caught him by the collar of his tunic and yanked him up into the air.

"You stupid runt!" the Topsidan boomed. "I may be a tail-dragger, but I'll still cut an Arkonide like you down to size with ease."

He whirled around and shoved Manoli against the nearest wall. The doctor collided against it with a crash, rebounded, and landed unceremoniously on the floor. The pain drove the air from his lungs. For a moment, he only saw stars.

A second later, Chon-Doh was upon him again. He grabbed Manoli by the scruff of the neck and dragged him to his feet. "Any last words?" he asked as he raised his fist and drew it back.

"Yes," a voice answered suddenly from behind the giant, and as Manoli looked over his opponent's shoulder, he saw Khatleen-Tarr —naked, bloody, and full of rage. "Pick on someone your own size." She grabbed hold of Chon-Doh's arm and pulled him around to her. A moment later, she delivered an uppercut to the john's snout that sent his head lurching backwards.

Wheezing, the man let go of Manoli. Equal parts woozy and bewildered, the human watched as the young Topsidian woman rammed her knee into her far larger opponent's abdomen. As the man bent forward, groaning, she hammered him with a haymaker to the temple.

"What's going on here?" a sharp voice demanded. "Stop it at once!"

Khatleen-Tarr immediately pulled away from the john who had become her enemy and took a step back, keeping her fists raised and her body in a ready posture.

In the doorway stood Bismall-Kehn in a flaming red cloak, staring at her in outrage.

“This filthy egg thief was trying to clobber me,” Chon-Doh snarled.

“I was only stopping him from killing Erikk-Mahnoli,” Khatleen-Tarr exclaimed.

“He was abusing Khatleen-Tarr,” Manoli cried.

“Enough! Not another word.” The nestmaster made a decisive gesture. “I don’t tolerate any fighting in this building. Rukr-Gran, escort this gentleman out. You two, stay here.”

A stony-faced guard slipped into the room behind Bismall-Kehn. “If you’d please follow me.” It was worded as a polite request, though it sounded like anything but.

Snorting reluctantly, Chon-Doh gathered up his clothes and quickly put them on. Then he marched over to the exit. “This will have repercussions,” he rumbled as he passed Bismall-Kehn.

The latter refrained from replying. He waited in silence until the client was gone. Then, the nestmaster exploded. “Did a Horja gnat sting you in the tail? Khatleen-Tarr, how could you make a scene like that? And Erikk-Mahnoli, what in the name of the Pale Brothers are you doing here in the nesting rooms? Didn’t I tell you explicitly that you *must* hide yourself from the clients to prevent any trouble for us? I’m putting my damn neck on the line to hide you. Have you forgotten that?”

“It’s my fault,” said Khatleen-Tarr. “I invited him to watch.”

“It’s actually that bastard’s fault,” Manoli opined. “He was abusing her, and in no small measure. Look at those scratches.” He pointed to the wounds on the young Topsidan’s chest and face.

Bismall-Kehn hissed with reluctance, then finally looked at the Kathleen-Tarr and huffed acquiescently. “*Here is here. Now is now.* Go and get treatment, little one! There’s nothing else left for us to do anyway.”

“I can handle that,” Manoli offered. “What else is a belly-slicer for?”

“Sure, as you wish.” Bismall-Kehn huffed again. He looked very dissatisfied, but his anger didn’t appear to be directed at them anymore. Rather, Manoli had the impression he was blaming himself for letting the guest into the bordello in the first place. “I need to call someone,” he said. “Someone who’ll solve this problem for me. Then we’ll never speak of it again.” He raised a claw in warning and held it up to the two of them. “But I’ll tell you one thing: I don’t want to experience anything like that ever again. Otherwise, I’ll put you out on the street, Khatleen-Tarr. And you, Erikk-Mahnoli, I’ll send you to the despot’s palace with a big ribbon around your belly. That’s a promise.”

With those words, he turned around and walked away with quick steps.

“That was not such a pleasant evening,” Manoli remarked.

“No,” Khatleen-Tarr concurred.

“Does that kind of thing happen often?” he asked.

She turned her head to the side. “Occasionally, a guest gets a little abusive. But I’ve never experienced anything like that before. Most of them treat us very decently, some even reverently. I wish you’d witnessed one of those nights.”

Her words made Manoli thoughtful. “Do you think it was due to my presence? That Chon-Doh smelled something when he came in. Could my scent have put him into a violent frenzy?”

Khatleen-Tarr darted her tongue in and out. “No. Don’t tell yourself that. You Arkonides may smell a little strong when you’re too warm. But you don’t have that much power over us.”

“Phew,” he sighed. “Let’s hope you’re right. It wouldn’t be much of a foundation for a common future if our diplomatic delegations beat each other’s heads in at every meeting as soon as the air conditioning breaks down.”

The Topsidan woman snickered.

“Come on,” the doctor said to her. “Let’s clean and dress your

wounds. Thanks for saving my ass, by the way."

"I should be thanking you," his companion replied. "It was very brave of you to attack that guy when he was much bigger and stronger than you. Stupid, but brave."

"Hmm, well. After a strong opening, I unfortunately lost momentum pretty quickly. If you hadn't been there, your john would have pretty much crushed me. Where did you learn to fight like that?"

Khatleen-Tarr looked away. "Not today, Erikk-Mahnoli. Another time, maybe."

The next morning, Manoli read in the news about a fatal mugging incident. An official from the despot's inner circle had evidently snuck into Khir-Teyal to enjoy some secret nocturnal pleasures. There, his car had caught the attention of some gang members. The man had made a stand, and they had shot him.

8.

The Right Side

Terrania

January 6, 2037

When Bai Jun returned to his apartment that evening, he bore witness to a memorable performance. In the middle of his living room stood Lhundup in his black suit. His fingers were clad in black leather gloves, and on his head he wore his gray woolen hat with the ear flaps folded down. A similarly gray bath towel hung over his shoulders.

With arms outstretched in an imperious manner, he was standing in front of the couch, where Cui was sprawled in leggings and a T-shirt. “I am your father!” proclaimed Bai Jun’s assistant in a feigned deep voice.

Cui raised her hands to her face with a mock look of fear and cried, “No. No!”

“Search your feelings. You know it to be true,” Lhundup insisted theatrically. “Join me, and together we can rule the galaxy.”

“Never!” Cui shouted, then curled up, giggling.

“Am I interrupting?” the mayor of Terrania asked politely.

His assistant flinched, eyes widening in horror as he saw Bai Jun standing in the doorway. The girl exploded in laughter, almost falling off the couch.

“I…uh..” Lhundup yanked off the hat and “cape.” He bowed apologetically. “Forgive me, Jun. We were just having some fun. I wanted to encourage her to come out of her shell a bit.”

“It clearly worked,” Bai Jun remarked. “And anyway, there’s nothing to forgive. I’m glad you two are getting along.” He gave Cui

a smile and tried to give no indication of what he had learned about her that afternoon.

The mysterious woman's words from Café Stellaris echoed in his mind. *We thought it would bring you joy to save a little street whore to atone for taking the life of another. But we can also take her away from you again.*

"Will you be home for dinner tonight?" Lhundup asked.

Bai Jun simply nodded.

"Then I'll let the tower's caterers know. What would you like?"

"Something light," Bai Jun replied. The day had given him a bit of an upset stomach.

While Lhundup left the room to contact the delivery service available to all officials living and working in the Stardust Tower, Bai Jun took off his jacket and sat next to Cui on the couch. "How are you doing today?" he asked.

"Good," she replied. Her body language still exhibited a certain shyness towards Bai Jun. That presumably came down to him being older than Lhundup and exuding the aura of an authority figure. But her eyes sparkled with a curiosity that gave him hope. The young thief was slowly gaining confidence.

"Has Lhundup been taking good care of you?"

Cui nodded. "Yes. He's very nice."

"What...uh...were you playing there?" He gestured at the towel, now hanging over a chair.

"Lhundup was telling me a story. He said it comes from his homeland of Tibet and tells of how humanity will travel to the stars." She giggled. "He can't act at all."

Bai Jun smirked. "That's true. He's too candid to be a good actor." He looked at her questioningly. "And how about you?"

For a moment, Cui eyed him warily. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t you want to tell us anything? You were so tight-lipped on the journey yesterday. I’d still love to know where you come from and what brought you to Terrania.”

Cui pulled her legs up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. Even without the subsequent headshake, her reluctance was plain as day. “I don’t want to talk about it,” she said. “Where I come from…it wasn’t nice.”

“And Terrania?” the mayor asked gently.

“I’m here because I’m wishing for a better life. Same as everyone else.”

“But you ended up on the street and had to steal to survive…”

Silently, Cui lowered her head. “Not all wishes come true,” she murmured.

Bai Jun looked at the girl without a word for a moment. Then he reached out with his left hand and tenderly lifted her chin. He looked her in the eye, his voice earnest. “Is someone threatening you? Is there someone you’re afraid of? If so, tell me. I’ll deal with them.”

Cui shook her head again. “No, it’s nothing.”

His time in the secret service and military had made Bai Jun a reasonably good judge of character. That was why he was fairly sure she was lying. He wondered if the mysterious woman and her backers had torn Cui away from her old life and dragged her here, only to leave her on the streets of Terrania and subtly make her path cross with his.

“All right,” he muttered, perhaps a little more grumpily than he’d intended.

His tone made Cui take notice immediately. “Are you angry with me?” she asked. Mild fear resonated in her voice.

“No!” he replied, hurrying to reassure her. “You’ve done nothing wrong. It’s just…I… Work. My job is making me stressed at the moment.”

“So you’re not going to send me away?”

“What gave you that idea?”

The girl shrugged her narrow shoulders. “I don’t know. They always send me away when they don’t like me anymore. And then I’m alone. But I don’t want to be alone anymore. Not here in Terrania, where it’s so cold. I want to stay with you. And with Lhundup. I like him. And you… I think I like you too.”

Bai Jun felt his heart abruptly growing warm. He took Cui’s hand and squeezed it. “We like you too, Cui. And you can stay with us as long as you like. No one will do anything to you. I’ll make sure of that. I promise.”

With those words, he came to an agreement with himself. He wouldn’t let them be playthings of the forces trying to subvert the state. Sure, he could understand the motivations of the woman from Café Stellaris—maybe. It was her methods that he abhorred. Methods that included exploiting a distraught young girl for nefarious purposes.

In his mind, he was already starting to forge plans. He would put a few trustworthy people on the mystery woman’s trail. And he would have to speak with Adams. He wasn’t thrilled about the idea, but better the old man learned about Bai Jun’s past from him than the distortion filter of this dissident group’s malicious gossip.

I have plenty to do, Bai Jun thought, resolute. He looked at Cui. *I’m doing it for you.* But he wasn’t entirely sure if he meant the girl on the couch or the girl whose dead body was lying buried somewhere in a Hohhot cemetery.

After dinner, when Cui had retired to her room, Bai Jun took Lhundup aside to brief him on the afternoon’s events. He had decided to refer to his new acquaintance from Café Stellaris as

"*Buming*," meaning "Ms. Unknown."

"I don't know exactly what she and her backers are intending," he concluded after a few minutes, "but I want to get Cui out of the line of fire for a few days."

His assistant nodded. "That's very smart. Do you have a plan?"

"Yes. Take Cui up to one of the empty apartments on the sixtieth floor," Bai Jun said. "There, you'll be close enough to call for help if you need it, but also far enough away that no one will find you there. Floors fifty-one to sixty are already finished but not yet occupied. It'll be at least two weeks until they are. That means you'll be completely undisturbed for now. And if you run into any workmen, just pretend you're carrying out an inspection in my name."

"Understood," said Lhundup. The young Tibetan scratched his head. "But why aren't we going to the police or putting the girl under military protection? Wouldn't that be even safer?"

Bai Jun shook his head. "I don't know how deeply our enemies have infiltrated Terrania. There are a lot of former military from the People's Republic in the city serving as law enforcement officers. If Buming and her people are former secret service agents, they might have ways and means of putting pressure on exactly those men and women."

"You think she's from the secret service?"

"It's only a gut feeling, but yes. Even during the siege of the *Stardust*'s landing site, there were members of the Guojia Anquan Bu, the Ministry of State Security, infiltrating and sabotaging my operation. Maybe also the Zhong Chang Er Bu or the 610 Office—to this day, I still don't know exactly."

"You mean the incident with the nuclear bomb in the desert."

"Yes. And it was only out in the desert because brave young Sid teleported it away. Otherwise, it would have exploded in the tunnels by the Arkonide energy shield and thus right next to our

encampment." He could still hardly believe how fortunate they had been.

"What about the mutants over at the Lakeside Institute?" Lhundup asked. "Couldn't they help us?"

"I thought about that too. But none of the ones left in Terrania have military training. They may be eager and have incredible gifts, but they still have no chance against a former unit from the Guojia Anquan Bu or the Zhong Chang Er Bu. I don't want to risk their lives."

He wished the igniter Ivan Goratschin was still with them. The American ex-soldier of Russian descent had not only combat experience, but also a remarkable offensive gift. Sadly, he'd disappeared in Peru after the mission against tech genius Allister T. Whistler, a.k.a. Scaramanca, to "find himself."

"What I'm getting at," Bai Jun continued, "is that I feel secrecy is our greatest ally at the moment. The fewer the people who know about Cui's location, the better for us all."

"Understood. Then I'll take her higher up the tower as discussed." Lhundup put a hand on Bai Jun's shoulder. "Don't worry. I'll look after her."

Relieved, the mayor nodded at this assistant. "Just what I wanted to hear. Thank you!"

He was about to go over to his desk to pick up his briefcase and then walk the short distance to his office, but a sound from his pod interrupted him. A new message from his blackmailers appeared on it: *Your decision, General?*

Bai Jun typed without hesitation, because he had made his choice. His answer consisted of just a single word: *No.*

When he started work the next morning, Bai Jun had his secretary make a last-minute appointment with Administrator Adams. Now that he had refused Buming, he had to get this

unpleasant matter over with quickly.

Two endless hours later, shortly before lunch, he received word that he could see Adams. Using the central anti-grav shaft, he went up to the fiftieth floor, where the administrator was already waiting in his office. He was sitting at his large desk, while behind him, beyond the panorama window, the ever-growing cityscape of Terrania unfolded. Bai Jun registered that the roofs of the nearby buildings were jostling closer together than ever. It gave the impression of a mighty base forming around the Stardust Tower.

"Ah, Mayor Bai, come in," Adams greeted him jovially, standing up from his black leather chair and walking around the table to shake Bai Jun's hand.

"Administrator Adams," he replied somewhat stiffly, giving a bow.

"Please, sit," the hunched old man said before going back to his own seat. "I'm glad to see you. I assume it's about my response to your energy concept for Terrania. I can understand if you have questions."

Bai Jun blinked in confusion. Naturally, he remembered the power distribution plan that he had compiled as a precaution in the days before the Arkonide fusion reactor's activation. But he'd had no idea that Adams had responded to it. Undoubtedly, this meant he *had* received a message about it—if the billionaire was anything, he was a man of pedantic thoroughness.

But somehow, it had passed Bai Jun by, and he didn't like that because it implied that the situation with Cui and Buming was affecting him too much. Whatever personal demons were haunting him, he couldn't allow them to compromise his work. *All the more important that I handle this quickly,* he thought.

Nevertheless, his curiosity was aroused. "Could you give me a quick hint?" he asked. "I'm afraid I haven't had time to look through all my messages this morning."

"Of course." Adams clasped his hands on the desk. "I wrote that

it's sadly not possible to harness as much power from the fusion reactor as you'd like to utilize for Terrania. I can give you fifty percent of the proposed output. That will ensure that private households don't sit in the dark. All other projects will unfortunately have to continue conserving power."

"Fifty percent?" Bai Jun repeated in surprise. "Only half? There must be some mistake. If the specifications I have on file are correct, I budgeted no more than forty percent of the reactor's nominal capacity for the city's supply. And now you want to halve even that. What do you need the rest of the energy for, if I may ask?"

Adams spread out his arms and gestured at the floor and ceiling of his office. "A large proportion will be needed for the Stardust Tower's ongoing construction. The Arkonide fiber compound that makes construction possible is exceptionally energy intensive to produce."

Bai Jun shook his head. "Administrator, with all due respect, it's January. It's dark and icy cold. The city of Terrania needs power, not a tower! It's already two kilometers tall. How much bigger is this monstrosity supposed to grow? Who needs these six hundred stories?"

"Humanity, Mayor Bai," Adams replied seriously. "The tower is a symbol, just like Perry Rhodan. It stands for humanity stepping into the future and out into space. In any case, its growth isn't arbitrary. There's a very well thought out plan behind it. The tower is going to be the seat of the government and administration of the Terran Union. Right now, the government bodies are spread all over the city, in some cases even the globe. But as soon as possible, they'll find a shared home in this building. That has absolute priority for the stabilization of the current situation on Earth."

Again, Bai Jun shook his head. "I understand your ambitions, but not your rush. The tower is not Terrania. That, out there, is Terrania." He pointed out of the window at the buildings far below. "And if you proceed with the plan you've just described, you'll be building this tower on the backs of all the people lacking light, heat, and, above all, supplies, because you're using the power from

Guanhui I for this construction site!"

Adams leaned back in his chair. His expression grew guarded. "Believe me, I'm not happy about this solution either. But there's a timeline for constructing Terrania and, in particular, for building the Stardust Tower, which we have to stick to. That can't be changed. I'll gladly give you as much logistical aid as I can to minimize any unpleasantness that may arise for the citizens of Terrania in the coming weeks. But as far as the power allocation from the fusion reactor is concerned, I don't have any wiggle room."

On the tip of Bai Jun's tongue was an accusation that in that case, the grandiose light ceremony in the Yinshan mountains and the joke about a new TV during the council meeting yesterday had been no more than a charade; political theater. But he didn't want to be rude. It would have been unbefitting of his position.

Besides, his gut told him that further protests wouldn't get him anywhere. Adams seemed to have firmly entrenched his plans for the Stardust Tower's construction. It almost sounded like an obsession. Was there some reason for that?

The former general sensed the suspicion that had awakened inside him. Was there some significance to the Stardust Tower that Adams was hiding from him? Was the old man from the West playing some furtive game? And if so, who was in the know? Mercant? Pounder? And why had Bai Jun been excluded?

This isn't over yet, Administrator, he thought. *I'm the mayor of Terrania. I'm not only responsible for all the people living here—I won't allow things to pass by directly under my nose that no one is telling me about. If you don't want to talk about it, then that's your call. There are other ways to get information.*

He couldn't help thinking of Buming. She had warned him about the Americans and their proclivity for high-handedness. This changed nothing between him and her, of course. But Bai Jun swore to himself that in future, he would pay closer attention to what Adams, Mercant, and the others were doing both inside and outside of Terrania rather than being satisfied with the official reports.

Adams cleared his throat, interrupting the ongoing silence. “Let’s change the subject, Mayor,” he said, making an effort to strike a conciliatory tone. “It sounds like you didn’t come here because of power distribution at all. So what can I do for you?”

Bai Jun said nothing for a moment. On a deep level, he didn’t feel the slightest desire to open up to Adams at the moment. But he knew that the feeling was mere childish anger, and that he was mixing personal and professional matters. It was not only right, but wholly necessary to tell the administrator about the danger threatening his image as mayor.

He was about to start, when suddenly his pod sounded. Startled, Bai Jun glanced at the display. He half expected to be hearing from Buming again, but instead, it was someone from tower security. He cast an apprehensive look at Adams.

“Please excuse me. I have to take this call. It could be important.”

“By all means,” Adams replied.

Bai Jun rose from his seat and left the office. In the anteroom, he activated the pod. “Yes?”

“Brettinger from tower security here,” said a powerful male voice. The man spoke Terranian with an audible German accent. “We have a problem, Mayor. Could you please come up to level 240?”

“Excuse me? Level 240?” That was high above, in a part of the tower that wasn’t even remotely finished yet.

“Yes, Mayor. A woman unknown to us has taken your assistant, Lhundup, hostage, along with a girl.”

Hearing that, Bai Jun’s stomach contracted into a hard knot. “Of course. I’m on my way.”

9.

No Way Out

Topsid

Five Weeks Remaining

"That's enough, Bismall-Kehn. I'm leaving." Eric Manoli underlined the words with a decisive gesture. "I've been here too long already. I haven't found any sign of my friends. It's time to search elsewhere."

"I strongly advise against it, Erikk-Mahnoli. Topsid is—"

"Dangerous for an Arkonide. I know. Nonetheless, I can't spend the rest of my life under your roof. I'll be careful, but I can't stay."

The nestmaster, dressed in luminescent blue and gold, hissed indignantly. "So ungrateful. Have I not gone to every effort to support your search? I've questioned sources whose existence you wouldn't have even known about. I gave you access to surveillance data and spaceport passenger lists. Beyond that, I'm in talks with two separate freighter pilots who have my confidence and have told them to be ready to smuggle you off Topsid as soon as the situation has settled a bit. There have been two bombing attacks on the military portion of the Kerh-Onf spaceport. They say the 'cold-bloods' are behind it. Checks there have been more rigorous since then."

Manoli pressed his lips together. Reason said to listen to Bismall-Kehn. The Topsidan had a better overview of his homeworld than Manoli did. But the doctor felt restless in his soul. He was sick of his forced stay in the Purple Nest, of the routine of sleeping, eating, cleaning, and sitting in his room in the evening while listening to the sounds of revelry and mating everywhere in the building. This absurd neverending party felt wrong to him given the crisis outside.

"It won't take much longer," Bismall-Kehn implored him. "I'm

sure the government will ease their checks in the next two to three weeks. Then you can be away from here, without you having to put your life in danger for no reason."

"Of course." Manoli sighed with resignation. "I'm sure you're right. Thanks, Bismall-Kehn. I'll see you later."

With a nagging feeling of dissatisfaction deep in his bowels, he left the nestmaster and returned to the servants' quarters. Perhaps every word Bismall-Kehn had said was correct. But that didn't change the fact that the doctor felt like a tiger in a far-too-small cage. The golden bars behind which he was pacing were slowly driving him crazy.

All night, Manoli tossed and turned in bed. The next morning, he decided he didn't want to wait any longer—regardless of what dangers might await a supposed Arkonide like him on Topsid. He had to try his luck outside, had to find other people and paths to lead him onward. There had to be a few "cold-blooded" opposition members in Khir-Teyal society who didn't immediately reach for a beam weapon when they saw an offworlder. Maybe one of them could help him gain passage into space.

Manoli's thoughts wandered to the transmitter. Stepping through that mysterious device of unknown origin was, of course, his first choice for getting back to where he had come from—to Berenger IV in the Vega system. It would be easy to reach Earth from among the friendly Ferrons. Easier than from here, at least. He didn't even know exactly how far Topsid was from Earth.

Returning via transmitter was practically impossible, however. He had no idea where the device was kept, but he assumed it was a military facility. The fragmented memories of his first few days after arriving on Topsid, which still tormented his dreams nightly, certainly suggested as much. But to find said military facility, let alone break into it, would require an awful lot of help.

For that kind of help, he would presumably have to join up with the opposition cells demanding the despot's overthrow and a new, demilitarized Topsid using bombs and slogans. Working alongside

those men and women was a drastic approach that could have unforeseen consequences. But it might be Manoli's only alternative if he didn't want to stay there and wait for Bismall-Kehn to eventually make good on his promises and help him escape.

Manoli still wasn't entirely sure why the Purple Nest's master had let him live there for all those weeks. During their first shared meal, the nestmaster had said, "Maybe because I'm cleverer than most of my people. Or maybe because I'm stupider."

By now, Manoli no longer believed that was the whole truth. He suspected that Bismall-Kehn was playing a kind of game, although exactly what kind, he couldn't say. At any rate, he had proven with the murder of the despot's official that he could act in absolute cold blood if anything stood in the way of his unknown goals.

Cold blood. Was that the solution to the puzzle? Was the ever-jovial, colorfully dressed nestmaster a secret enemy of the regime? If so, that would mean he expected that harboring an Arkonide would come with some benefits. The successful return of a citizen of the Grand Imperium could have certain diplomatic advantages.

All the more important for me to be gone by then, Manoli realized. Because if no one else noticed beforehand, an Arkonide delegation would definitely spot that he didn't belong to their species. And he hadn't escaped from a Topsidian secret prison only to wind up in an Arkonide one. Especially since he might reveal details under pressure from the Arkonides—about Crest and Thora, for example—that might be somewhat politically charged.

Decision made, he thought. *I'm leaving.*

He couldn't simply march out of there, of course. He was still wearing sandal boots and a short tunic. Not exactly the right attire for braving the streets of a ghetto like Khir-Teyal, especially not as a human or Arkonide. It practically screamed for a beating, or worse. That meant he needed other clothing and a little more besides: money, a map, a mobile access point to the communication network, and maybe a weapon. And he could only think of only one person in the entire Purple Nest who could help him get all that: Khatleen-Tarr.

“Am I disturbing you?” Manoli asked quietly.

“Yes,” Khatleen-Tarr replied, her tone somber.

Manoli realized immediately that she was having one of her phases again. She was sitting in a chair by the window in her room and staring out into the misty forest of columns that made up Khir-Teyal. It was afternoon. Soon, her romantic services would be required again. But there was still a little time. Until then, she seemed happy to sit and mope.

It was usually better to leave her to it, but this time, Manoli had no intention of backing out of the room. He needed to talk to the Topsidan, regardless of whatever had pissed her off.

“It’s really important, Khatleen-Tarr.”

Slowly, she turned her head and stared at him darkly with one lizard eye. “What is it?”

Manoli closed the door. Then he pulled up a chair and explained everything to her. All the while, she looked at him, motionless. He wasn’t sure if she even blinked. At moments like these, she seemed infinitely alien to him.

Still, he had no other choice. Khatleen-Tarr was his only ally in the Purple Nest. Also, he knew that behind the impish girl’s unapproachable facade hid a caring companion. It was to her that he directed his appeal.

When he was done, Khatleen-Tarr didn’t say a word. She remained silent for so long that Manoli cocked his head questioningly, wondering if she’d fallen asleep with her eyes open. That did happen, he knew. Topsidans were able to regulate their internal body temperature practically at will. If they wanted to sleep, they adjusted it downwards, making themselves “cold-blooded,” as they termed it, drastically reducing all their physical needs. But this dulled their senses as well, especially the all-too-important smell and taste. In order to be warned of dangerous

changes to their surroundings despite that, they sometimes left one eye open. To a human, it looked very strange.

“I’m sorry, Erikk-Mahnoli,” she said at last. “I can’t help you.”

“Why not?” he asked, a little annoyed. “You could even come with me. Escape your life here, which clearly doesn’t make you happy. We could leave Topsid together.”

“Erikk-Mahnoli, your plan is crazy. You’d never make it to this fantastical device, this transmitter. Especially not with me in tow. Besides, I can’t leave the Purple Nest any more than you can. Or least, I can’t go anywhere near the spaceport or the government district.”

“I don’t understand why you—”

“Because I’m a deserter!” she snarled at him.

“What?” This was the first he had heard of it.

“I was an infantry soldier in the invasion fleet that attacked the Vega system,” she went on, bitter, but apparently eager to finally clear the air. “I fought on Rofus and Ferrol, killed men, women, and...maybe even children. Finally, I witnessed a moon being vaporized under concentrated fire from the Topsidian fleet. An entire moon! I’ll never forget that image. Never.”

Manoli rubbed his neck uncomfortably. “I’m... I’m sorry. I didn’t know that.”

“How could you?” she replied softly. “No one in the nest knows it—except Bismall-Kehn. He took me in when I fled the army shortly after our homecoming and ended up in Khir-Teyal. There’s a roof over my head and a task that lets me shut off my mind and forget about everything. On top of that, he makes sure the military police don’t find me. I’m indebted to him for that. I can’t leave him.”

So that was how it was. The woman was a refugee, just like him. Manoli wondered if the only reason she slept with strange men night after night, let them degrade and use her, was because she

wanted to punish herself. Or was it about the high of the parties and the mating? Did those let her forget what she had done? *No,* Manoli reminded himself. *She told me this kind of sex means nothing to her.* Then perhaps it was indeed a kind of bizarre physical penance that she had unconsciously placed on herself to atone for what she had done to others.

Either way, he still needed her help. “Please help me acquire a little money and clothing, at least,” he pleaded. “That’s all I ask. For the sake of our friendship.”

The Topsidan exhaled in resignation. “Fine. But don’t expect any more from me than that. And I definitely won’t intervene to help you if it goes awry. As soon as you’re on the other side of the front door, you’re on your own.”

“I’ll just have to live with that,” said Manoli.

That same evening, when he returned to his room after cleaning duty in the purple parlor, Manoli found—to his surprise and joy—a small bundle there. It included plain brown overalls, sturdy military boots, a hooded jacket, and an envelope with Topsidian banknotes that would keep his head above water for maybe a week if he was reasonably frugal. He assumed this had all been paid for by, and taken from, Khatleen-Tarr’s own pocket.

Thank you, he thought. *You’re a good friend.* He regretted that the Topsidan wasn’t coming with him, not only because he could have really used her local knowledge. He would also miss her because she had been his only true ally on the lizard planet.

Manoli hid the items under his bed and waited. As dawn broke and the last guest had left the Purple Nest with a serene smile, he pulled out the clothes and money again, got changed, and then crept out of the room. All was quiet on his floor. The girls and the servants were sleeping.

On tiptoes, he scurried along the corridor, then down the stairs and into the lowermost of the three spheres. It would get tricky in the entrance hall. True, the door to the bordello would be locked

but unguarded in the early hours, both the receptionist and the guards allowing themselves a few hours' sleep. Without a key, though, he would be left standing there looking silly, especially as there was still a local energy shield protecting the door from the effects of beam weapons. And Manoli didn't have the slightest clue how to disable the humming, yellowish field.

That left only one route: the windows. He retrieved the corded vacuum cleaner from the utility room and wedged it under one of the windows in the Great Parlor. Then he pulled the ten-meter power cable out of the casing, wrapping it around the foot of a heavy statue just to be on the safe side, and finally threw it out of the window.

If I've miscalculated the tensile strength of these things, it's going to be one hell of a short escape, he thought.

He tugged on it again to check, then at last swung himself over the window ledge. The cable held, and a few dizzying moments of climbing later, Manoli safely reached the streets of Khir-Teyal. He scurried to the nearest crossing and turned off so that he couldn't be seen from the Purple Nest. Then he pulled his hood lower over his face and blended into the hazy atmosphere of the ghetto.

Manoli had no doubt about his goal. He had to join up with some of the opposition against the despotate, specifically the "cold-bloods." Only they could and would help him, a supposed Arkonide, flee the planet.

He had only been able to ascertain a few of the names of well-known regime critics: Krhak-Hon, Zrec-Moyn, and Drmik-Zenja. He would have to discreetly drop those names here and there. He hoped he would be approached after that, and that those who did seek him out would actually belong to the opposition and not be agents of the authorities.

God, this is pure insanity, he thought. But what else could he do? He was an alien on a world that was alien to him. No matter how many hours he had spent on studying the culture using the public information channels, it only helped so much.

Manoli spent most of the day laying a trail. He engaged surly meat stall owners in conversation and tried to elicit information from the staff at small bars. Each time, he mentioned the names Krhak-Hon, Zrec-Moyn, and Drmik-Zenja. In the end, he wanted to be associated with them. Some chased him away the moment they realized he was an alien, despite him masking his face with a scarf. Finally, one took pity on him and directed him to an establishment with the confidence-inspiring name Ghak-Ruk's Sludge Pit.

"Ask for Ghak-Ruk, offworlder. He might be able to help you," said the innkeeper. "But don't tell him you got his name from me. I stay out of politics. I don't want anything to do with all that."

Manoli promised to keep quiet. Half an hour later, he was standing in front of an unusually flat building by Topisidian standards. It was a one-story cuboid with a prominent domed roof. Above the entrance hung a glowing sign with three conspicuously unclothed lizard ladies in relaxed poses.

Inside, the venue had the heavy, steamy atmosphere of a Turkish bath. Manoli gave a prayer of gratitude to Pounder and NASA for requiring such rigorous fitness training from their astronauts. With slightly weaker circulation, he would have likely collapsed to the floor unconscious after three steps.

Even so, he broke into a sweat under his enveloping clothes as he pushed through the steam rising from cracks in the ground to get to the reception desk. A green-scaled Topsidan woman stood behind it. She was wearing almost nothing; however, her scales exhibited a complex pattern of black circles and ovals—body decoration that resembled tattoos on Earth.

"I'd like to speak to Ghak-Ruk," Manoli said.

"Do you have an appointment, offworlder?" she asked.

"No," he replied. "But perhaps he could spare a little time for me anyway. It's about a mutual friend of ours: Krhak-Hon." He had chosen the name at random. He could have named either of the other dissidents, but Manoli assumed this would at least make the owner understand what he wanted to talk to him about.

“Wait.” The Topsidan pressed a hidden button. Shortly thereafter, a burly man appeared wearing nothing but sandals, shorts, and metal bracelets. His scaled, gray skin boasted black patterns as well, especially on his barrel-shaped chest.

The woman said something to the man that Manoli’s Postrionic couldn’t translate. He wondered if she had used some kind of gutter slang or remnants of regional dialects spoken on Topsid before a single global language had prevailed.

A handy trick for preventing aliens from understanding what you’re talking about in an era of widespread automatic translation, he thought.

The man growled some kind of answer and inclined his head. Then he vanished again.

“Wait here, offworlder!” the woman ordered.

Manoli nodded and took a seat on a stone block that seemed to be heated, much to his unease. The Topsidans’ love of warmth and humidity was truly taxing. It took a while, during which time he genuinely wondered if his host was trying to cause him circulatory collapse. But then, the tattooed man reappeared and gestured for the doctor to follow him.

Manoli was led along a narrow passageway and down a staircase, arriving at a room that resembled a natural cave. Instead of being comfortably cool, however, the space had even more of a subtropical climate. Steam clouds hung in the air and water ran down the walls.

The back half of the chamber was dominated by a kind of pool, but there was no water in it. Rather, it was filled almost to the brim with dark-brown sludge. Gas bubbles rose up out of the dark broth and burst on the surface with a gentle *pop*. Fortunately, it was odorless.

At one end of the pool sat a Topsidan. He was submerged up to his armpits, leaving very little of him visible. What was poking out of the sludge gave Manoli the impression that this fellow was a real

giant. Bismall-Kehn was already among the better nourished of his species, but this Topsidan's mass had to be twice as much, at least.

He's got to weigh four hundred kilograms, the doctor estimated, dumbfounded. *What a monster!*

"Welcome, offworlder," the Topsidan boomed. "I'm Ghak-Ruk. Sit with me and we can talk."

"I truly appreciate you seeing me," Manoli said. "But I'd prefer to stay outside."

The man's expression darkened. "Do you mean to insult Ghak-Ruk's hospitality?"

Manoli turned his head to the side. "Of course not." He cast an uncertain glance at the tattooed guard. *All or nothing,* he thought, slowly pulling off his scarf and hood.

Ghak-Ruk looked at him with the stillness characteristic of a lizard and nothing else. He gave no hint of whether it surprised him or bothered him to have an Arkonide in his presence. The tattooed man, too, only stared at Manoli, not taking any action.

Well, that's the first hurdle passed, he thought. He undressed and awkwardly clambered into the sludge bath. As expected, it was warm too, but not as unpleasant as he had feared. It essentially felt like a hot bath. Truly relaxing, actually—only, he hadn't come here for pleasure.

For a while, they sat facing each other in silence as Ghak-Ruk took a scrutinizing look at him. At last, the Topsidan began to speak.

"Now, what I can do for a friend of Krhak-Hon?"

"To tell you the truth, I'm not really a friend of his," Manoli admitted. "But I'd like to be."

"Is that so?" Ghak-Ruk asked. "And why, if I may ask? Why is a pale-skin interested in a small-time Topsidian politician?"

“Not a small-time Topsidian politician,” Manoli said. “One of the leaders of the cold-bloods.”

“That doesn’t answer my question. But since you mentioned the ‘cold-bloods,’ I’m hoping your next words convince me.”

Manoli looked at the man with a serious expression. “They probably won’t. But I have no other choice.” Then he told his story of a kidnapped Arkonide doctor who had been taken captive by the government and released in Khir-Teyal by an unknown benefactor. He left out the whole episode surrounding Bismall-Kehn. Instead, he drew out his search for Krhak-Hon a little.

At one point in his narrative, the guard tilted his head slightly, as if receiving an order via a tiny headset. Quietly, he stepped over to the pool, crouched down, and murmured something to Ghak-Ran that Manoli didn’t understand. The master of the house curtly inclined his head and waved the man away with a hand gesture. Aside from that, they remained undisturbed.

When Manoli was finished, Ghak-Ruk inclined his head again. “I understand,” he said. “Now, please leave me again, Erikk-Mahnoli.”

“What about my request to be put in touch with Krhak-Hon?”

“I have no interest in helping you.”

“What?” It took all Manoli’s effort not to shout. “I spent the last half hour telling you my entire life story, and now you tell me you don’t want to help me?”

“Yes,” Ghak-Ruk replied plainly. “My advice is to leave while you still can.”

Shaking his head, Manoli got out of the sludge bath. He had no idea what had suddenly gotten into the owner. Had he said something wrong? Or did it relate to some piece of information the guard had relayed? Either way, he was right back at the beginning now—and that frustrated him to no end.

Still, he was smart enough not to provoke the Topsidan in his own domain. In Khir-Teyal, you could disappear faster than you

could spell out your own name. Bismall-Kehn had made that clear to Manoli on his first day.

Under an artificial waterfall, the doctor washed the sludge off his body, then he dried himself with the towels lying ready and got dressed again.

"Thank you for seeing me," he said in parting. He didn't entirely manage to keep the disappointment from his voice.

"Sharp-Eyes," Ghak-Ruk suddenly said.

Manoli blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Look for Sharp-Eyes. He's the man you need. All the others are just lackeys."

Excited, Manoli took a step closer. Maybe his visit to Ghak-Ruk's Sludge Pit hadn't been a total waste after all. "Where do I find him?"

But his host's willingness to share information was already used up. "Go now," he said. "May your tail never go rotten."

With very mixed feelings, Manoli left the bathhouse and went back out onto the street. By now, it was evening. Life had grown louder, more colorful—and more dangerous.

It's time for me to find somewhere to sleep, he thought.

He turned around and was just about to walk down the street when a towering Topsidan with dark gray scales appeared before him as if from nowhere. He was wearing a wild hodgepodge of rags and had an air about him that was anything but trustworthy.

"What do you want?" Manoli asked. He tried hard to keep his voice steady, but he was painfully aware that he was totally unarmed and physically inferior to his opponent. His worries increased exponentially when the Topsidan spoke.

"End of the line, pale-skin," he growled, drawing an Eastern-looking knife.

Without a word, Manoli whirled around to make his escape. He didn't make it a single step. Behind him stood a second thug dressed just like his companion but armed with a silver baton. He raised it and a blue crackle flickered around the weapon's tip.

An electro shocker! Manoli realized. *Shit!*

It was his last conscious thought before the weapon struck his head. In the blink of an eye, it grew dark around him.

Woozy, Manoli looked around.

"I'm still alive?" he asked in disbelief.

"Looks that way," Bismall-Kehn replied. "But you deserve no credit for that. You tried your hardest to kill yourself out there. It was pure luck that my people found you just at the moment those muggers were about to filet you."

Groaning, Manoli sat up. His skull was pounding as if someone had thrown him into a washing machine and put it on the spin cycle. "I don't know what to say."

"Say thank you," Bismall-Kehn suggested. "And kindly stop this nonsense. Even my generosity has its limits." He leaned forward so close to Manoli that his snout almost touched the latter's nose. His voice turned into a menacing hiss. "So if you ever betray my trust again, Erikk-Mahnoli, you will wish you'd never met me."

10.

On a Knife-Edge

Terrania

January 9, 2037

As Bai Jun rode an express elevator up to the Stardust Tower's 240th floor, he asked himself again and again what had gone wrong. Why hadn't his precautions worked? How had Buming picked up Lhundup and Cui's trail so quickly? Could the girl have a transmitter under her skin? He hadn't looked for anything like that —criminally negligent, in retrospect, and one more sign that he had lost objectivity when it came to Cui's face.

When he got out of the elevator almost a thousand meters above Terrania's ground level, a squad of security guards was already waiting for him. They wore gray trousers and windbreakers with the Terran Union's galaxy symbol on the sleeves, the characteristic needle shape of the Stardust Tower rising up in front of it. Armed with drawn pistols and filigree headsets, they stood on the bare fiber concrete landing that surrounded the central elevator.

On the opposite wall was a doorway. Through it, he could see the shell of an open-plan office. Metal struts supported the ceiling, along which ran open tubes for the not-yet-installed electrics. An ice-cold wind was blowing in through unglazed windows. Bai Jun shivered.

"Which one of you is Brettinger?" he asked the group.

"Me," said a wiry man with a five o'clock shadow and hair combed firmly backwards, ending in a ponytail.

"Status report," Bai Jun requested. In a crisis, he instinctively fell back into his role as a general.

"The culprit is in the room over there with the two hostages.

She's carrying an automatic pistol and wearing light protective gear that might hide more weapons. She said if anyone comes into the room, she'll kill the hostages."

"Understood," Bai Jun replied curtly. "But how did this woman and her hostages even get to the 240th floor? Last time I saw my assistant and the girl, they were on their way to the sixtieth."

"The emergency call originally came from the sixtieth," the guard explained. "Two cleaners reported a group of three intruders in black making trouble at the door of an apartment that was supposed to be empty. When we arrived, the door had already been broken into and shots could be heard from inside. We engaged the trio in counterfire and managed to take out two of the three. Both of them were Chinese, male."

"Do you have the men in custody?"

"I'm afraid not. They died during the exchange of fire. We tried to save them, but it was too late. It wasn't just our bullets. They clearly had poison capsules in their teeth. No idea why they were so eager to kill themselves."

Bai Jun grunted indignantly. "That is less than ideal."

"I quite agree. The third intruder, a woman, managed to get into the apartment and overpower the shooter there. When we got to her, she already had your assistant and the girl at her mercy. We had to let her escape. Strangely, she chose to go up, even though it would be a dead end."

"Perhaps," Bai Jun murmured. "Or perhaps not." He doubted the kidnappers had come into the Stardust Tower without a plan B. He thought for a moment, then turned back to the tower security leader. "Very well. I'll try speaking with the kidnapper. Maybe I'll manage to get through to her. Meanwhile, I'd like you to get in touch with the Lakeside Institute. If they can, they should send us a teleporter and a telekinetic specialist. Most of them will be on the way to Arkon with Perry Rhodan, but I think Sid González is in the city. And that girl, Betty Toufry."

Neither would have been Bai Jun's first choice in the present scenario. He didn't like putting young people in harm's way, but the situation was too critical to avoid their help.

"And what should they do when they get here?" Brettlinger asked.

"Keep their eyes open. Make sure our culprit doesn't suddenly try to disappear." In principle, he had no idea how Buming was planning to make her escape from this height. She wasn't wearing an Arkonide anti-grav module, certainly. Brettlinger and his team would have noticed that. But she was a former agent of the People's Republic. She wouldn't even go to the bathroom without a backup plan.

The mayor steeled himself and walked past the guards to the empty doorframe. Specialists existed for these scenarios, to be sure —police psychologists, negotiators, and such. But for Bai Jun, the situation was personal. This woman wanted to meet only him, and to that end, she'd captured the only two people in all of Terrania who were more to him than work colleagues or casual acquaintances.

"Buming, can you hear me?" he called out. Only after he had spoken the name did he realize that she might have no idea what he meant, since he had only called her that privately. But she grasped who he meant straight away.

"General," came her voice from somewhere beyond the doorway. "I thought you'd show up."

"I want to speak with you. May I come in?"

"As long as you're alone and unarmed, by all means."

Bai Jun cast one last glance back at Brettinger and his security team. "Don't interfere!" he ordered quietly. "Not before I give the signal. And bring me those two mutants, quickly. I don't know how long I can keep her occupied."

He waited for their nods of approval before raising his arms and

stepping through the doorframe. Aside from the metal supports erected at regular intervals, the tubes on the ceiling, and a few rolls of insulation in a corner, the space was largely empty. There was practically no cover—and no way to approach Buming and her hostages without being seen.

The woman was at the farthest end, right by the large panoramic window pointing east. Bai Jun could see the city with its uniform, multi-story buildings, then the transition into the chaos of temporary accommodations. Beyond that followed the flat hilly landscape of the Gobi Desert. A little more than thirty kilometers away, he could make out Terrania's spaceport, still under construction. From a kilometer up, it was an overwhelming view.

But Bai Jun couldn't enjoy it, because two other details immediately caught his attention. For one thing, the window still had no glance, making it essentially no more than a huge hole in the wall through which a wintry desert wind blew in, icy cold, and behind which was a thousand-meter drop. For another, Lhundup was sitting on the ground with tied hands and bleeding temples, while Cui was directly in her kidnapper's hands. Buming had positioned the child in front of her as a human shield and was holding a pistol with a silencer and extended magazine against her head.

"We meet again, General," said the woman.

"I wish I could say it's a pleasure," Bai Jun snarled. He looked down at his assistant. "Are you okay, Lhundup?"

The man raised his eyes. Shame covered his face. "I failed you. I couldn't protect Cui. I'm sorry." The young Tibetan seemed to be pained more by his failure than by his current circumstances.

"We underestimated our opponent," Bai Jun said. "That was my mistake above all. But she hasn't won this battle yet. Otherwise, we wouldn't be standing here right now." He looked up and fixed his eyes on his enemy. "Correct?"

A smile danced around the corners of Buming's mouth, though it didn't reach her eyes. "To be honest, I imagined this operation

going somewhat differently. If it were up to me, my comrades and I would be in a secure location with your assistant and your girl by now and dictating our next actions to you. From the look of things, I'll instead be lucky to get out of here unscathed."

"That's how I see it too," Bai Jun confirmed. "So show a remnant of common sense and cooperation and let the hostages free. I'll make sure you get a fair trial in Terrania. We both know that you can't expect that in your homeland."

"I'm afraid that's not enough for me. I have two hostages, but I only need one to get away from here. The other gives me a little extra room for negotiation, don't you think?" The woman strengthened her grip on Cui, who gave a soft gasp. Naked fear was written all over her face.

"These threats are unnecessary, just like your whole operation," Bai Jun replied. Before she could answer, he quickly continued, "I thought about what you said yesterday. You're right. China shouldn't stand behind the Americans, but rather demand its place in the world with well-founded pride in its heritage and achievements. Just like every other society on Earth, we have a right to have a voice in the new world order—a voice that is heard. So it's not your principles that I refuse. It's your methods."

"What's that supposed to mean?" the woman snarled.

"Treachery and intrigue," Bai Jun said. "Exactly what you accuse the Americans of. You insist that Perry Rhodan's vision of a unified humanity is that of a human race standing beneath the Stars and Stripes. And even if I don't share that opinion because I know the man far better than you do, I can't prove the opposite to you here and now. Furthermore, I have to concede that the influence of old men from the West is currently very high in Terrania. How should we counteract that? What can we do to change it? Are we Chinese supposed to resort to treachery and intrigue now, thus putting ourselves on equal footing with the ones you view with nothing but contempt? Or does our honor not command us to be better than them? If we reflect on our virtues—dedication, humility, wisdom—and if we employ these in service of the new humanity, then our influence will surely grow on its own, for the people of Earth will

recognize that we were born for greatness. We'll be shown a respect that's far more powerful than the fear and hate you'll arouse in people's minds if you plan to achieve your goals with terror and violence."

"You're a daydreamer," Buming said with scorn. "The world doesn't work that way."

"Wrong," Bai Jun corrected her. "The world *didn't* work that way, I'll grant you that. But since we pushed open the door to space, since we learned of the existence of alien life, all that has changed. The Ferrons have settled an entire solar system. The Topsidans rule over several. The Arkonides are said to have founded a vast stellar empire. You can't reach greatness like that through regional separatism, through spats between populations that must look like scuffles between children in a sandbox to our galactic neighbors. Earth has to overcome this way of thinking and reach for higher goals. And it will, I'm absolutely sure. The states will cease to exist. We will all be Terrans. Nevertheless, China will never be forgotten because we were there from the start. But how do you want us to be remembered? As eternal grievance-mongers who tried to fight against the course of fate? Or as shining examples who took on this new challenge without fear and full of drive?"

"He's right," said Cui suddenly. The fear had vanished from her face, as if someone had wiped it away with a dustcloth. She freed herself from her kidnapper's grasp and looked at her calmly. "What we're doing is wrong."

"Be quiet!" Buming ordered her.

Bai Jun involuntarily raised his eyebrows. "How am I supposed to take this?" he asked, even though what was happening was immediately clear to him. *It was all a trick,* he realized, the scales falling from his eyes. *Cui was one of them.*

It sounded absurd, but it explained a few things: why she didn't want to talk about her past and why he had found no trace of her former life. Presumably, she was an artificial creation, altered by unscrupulous surgeons to resemble the girl Bai Jun had killed in Hohhot. And in that case, she probably didn't have a subcutaneous

transmitter, but had directly called her coconspirators to the new hiding place Lhundup had brought her to.

"But don't you hear what he's saying?" continued Cui—or whatever her real name might have been. "His words hold the wisdom of a man we should bow to. You must see that. I, at least, am not going along with this deception anymore."

"Then you'll have to suffer the consequences in the end," the Chinese agent retorted. "I hope that's clear to you." She directed her gaze at Bai Jun. "But first you. You're a danger to our cause. And you always will be. Your words are too pretty. I certainly see *that*. And as such, I have to eliminate you. I'm sorry; it's nothing personal."

She raised her pistol and pointed it at Bai Jun.

"No!" Cui cried, throwing herself at the woman's arm.

A shot rang out. With a groan, the girl slumped to the floor. Without a moment's thought, Bai Jun jumped towards his opponent. Quick as a flash, he grasped her weapon, pulled her hand outwards, and twisted the pistol out of her hand.

But Buming had quick reflexes too. No sooner had he adjusted his grip and swung the pistol's barrel in her direction than she struck him hard and knocked the weapon aside. With a clatter, it landed a few meters away on the concrete floor.

"Now!" Bai Jun shouted, simultaneously parrying a rapid series of martial arts blows aimed at his chest and throat.

Behind him, the patter of boots grew loud as the tower security team stormed the room. Bai Jun was distracted for a fraction of a second, and he paid for this inattentiveness with a painful punch to the gut. Groaning, he staggered backwards.

"Freeze! Don't move!" Brettinger roared.

The woman eyed Bai Jun with a look of disdain. "I'll see you again soon!" she promised him, then pressed a keypad on her wrist.

As if from nowhere, a flying machine descended from the sky. It was a quadrotor, an aircraft with four flexible rotors pointing vertically downwards. It was clearly unmanned—a drone that was either remote controlled or acted autonomously.

Before Bai Jun had overcome his surprise—so *that* was her plan B!—Buming had already spun around and thrown herself out of the panoramic window with a mighty leap towards the drone.

"Get that thing out of the sky!" Brettinger shouted, and his men began to fire. But the bullets weren't what thwarted Buming's escape. Rather, mutant powers turned the tide in their favor.

From one second to the next, the agent was suddenly hanging motionless in the air, her body in mid-jump, her arms stretched out towards the quadrotor, which was tottering under the impact of bullets from the security guards' pistols.

"Got her," said a girl's tense voice. Bai Jun recognized it as Betty Toufry.

With a quick jolt, the agent was pulled back inside the building. Not a moment later, the quadrotor's motors screeched and the aircraft plummeted out of sight in a cloud of smoke.

That same instant, sparks flew in the air next to Buming, and a narrow-chested Latino teenager with slicked-back hair appeared out of nowhere: Sid González. Before the woman even knew what was happening, he had already grabbed her by the hand and vanished in another shower of sparks.

"Got her too," he announced after reappearing ten meters behind Bai Jun. Immediately, half a dozen weapon muzzles were pointed at the women.

"My kind of capture," Brettinger declared, grinning.

Bai Jun breathed a sigh of relief. The mutants had arrived just in the nick of time to carry out *his* plan B. He looked at the woman. "Seems like we got to see each other again quicker than you thought, no?" Then he turned to the guards. "Lock her up and untie

Lhundup!" A moment later, his gaze fell on Cui. The girl lay on the concrete floor, a pool of blood forming below her. "And call a doctor immediately! Cui's been shot. She needs treatment right now."

Bai Jun crouched down beside her and rested a hand on her shoulder. Her face was ashen, and her breath rattled. Her hazy eyes sought his, stunned. Fear reached for his heart with cold claws. "Everything's going to be fine, okay? It's just a gunshot wound. We'll get it fixed. I won't let you die. Not you!"

Next to him, Sid emerged. "Let me handle it. I'll take her to the hospital. I'm quicker than any emergency response team."

The mayor looked up at the boy. With pursed lips, he nodded, at the same time shifting a little to the side. "Thanks. I'll follow and meet you there."

"You can gladly come along too, Mayor," Sid offered, holding out his left hand.

Without hesitation, Bai Jun took it.

Less than a heartbeat later, they teleported.

11.

The Festival of the Three Moons

Topsid

One Hour Remaining

Evening fell over Topsid's capital city, and with it began the Festival of the Three-Moon Constellation, or more colloquially, the Festival of the Three Moons.

Manoli had read that this was one of the most important holidays on Topsid. It was only celebrated at irregular intervals, years apart, whenever the three moons known as the three Pale Brothers were exactly aligned above Kerh-Onf, giving the impression of a three-part lantern, glowing brown, blue, and red.

In this triple constellation, they were also called the "Heavenly Nest," and viewed by the Topsidans as a symbol of the ideal nest. Accordingly, the Festival of the Three Moons was a night to celebrate life itself—and where more children were conceived than on any other night, per the statistics.

The three-moon motif was incorporated everywhere in the city. Globes of light hung from the bridges between the residential towers. "Moon wanderers" walked through the streets, painting three circles on doors. Badges, printed jackets, tail jewelry, and caps were available to purchase. And the meat stalls offered a special dish with three kinds of meat on a skewer to honor the holiday. In the center of Khir-Teyal, presumably paid for by some well-intentioned sponsor, towered an enormous light installation showing three holographic moons that gracefully orbited one another.

The girls in the Purple Nest wore fancy costumes, a triple star made of glistening material that stretched from chest to waist, held in place by tantalizingly thin straps. Alongside those, they wore special bangles, and some of the prostitutes had painted the three-

moon constellation on their scales.

For Manoli, it was to be a night like any other. One more night spent in growing dissatisfaction in his golden cage, high up in the bordello's servants' quarters. But a message from Bismall-Kehn that he had received a week ago left the doctor simmering with excitement too.

The nestmaster had been away for a few days before that. Subsequently, he'd had the following missive brought to Manoli: *You can fly home. I've arranged everything. At the eleventh hour on the night of the Festival of the Three Moons, a ferry will be waiting to bring you to a freighter bound for the Lossau system at the edge of the Grand Imperium. Be prepared, Erikk-Mahnoli.*

He did just that. He had again put on the boots and hooded jacket that Khatleen-Tarr had acquired for him five weeks ago for his escape from the Purple Nest. Everything he had learned about Topsidian culture was on a thin data storage device in his breast pocket. He planned to take it with him to Earth and hand it over to scientists there. And for Kathleen-Tarr, he had recorded a few words thanking her for the time they had spent together, just in case he was forced to leave without a chance to say goodbye.

Aside from that, there wasn't much for him to prepare. He had come to Topsid with little in the way of luggage, and he was leaving the lizard planet in the same state.

Through the window, he saw cars and gliders approaching the bordello, bringing guests to the festivities that would be taking place that night. The vehicles were almost exclusively expensive models; the usual clientele were not being admitted today.

Bismall-Kehn had spared no expense, arranging a banquet of orgiastic proportions. Manoli had witnessed mountains of exquisite dishes and vats full of the finest berry wine being brought into the kitchen. The nestmaster had also stocked up the staff with a few new girls and a whole host of extra guards. There was no doubt that quite a few VIPs were gathering at the city's most tasteful temple of lust.

Khatleen-Tarr came in through the door, which was already ajar. For some reason, Topsidans never knocked before entering. Manoli had learned to live with that.

“Erikk-Mahnoli, help me out here,” she said. Like her colleagues, she was wearing the exceptionally skimpy moon costume, along with sandals and a few bangles. Her body glimmered like it had been oiled, and a faint scent of exotic spices wafted into the room with her. On her snout and around her head she wore a bronze-colored half-mask decorated with all manner of glitter. “This stubborn mask won’t stay on,” she added, unsuccessfully fumbling with her claws at the cord running around the back of her head.

Manoli smirked. “I think this is the first time you’ve asked me for help getting dressed.”

“Don’t read too much into it,” she retorted. “You’re the only one left. The others are all downstairs already.”

“All right, then. Come here.” He raised his hands and undid the knot so that he could tie it again. “What are these masks for, anyway? I didn’t know this was a masquerade ball.”

“Bismall-Kehn gave them to me and a few other girls so we don’t run the risk of being recognized by any of the guests. There are quite a lot of ministers and officers here today, even one or two ‘war heroes’ from the Vega invasion.”

“You don’t sound overly happy about that.”

Khatleen-Tarr snorted. “You know my past. Can you blame me?”

“No, you’re right. I’m sorry.” He furrowed his brow. “How come there are so many bigwigs in the Purple Nest today? Is that normal for the Festival of the Three Moons?” He would have assumed that their most important holiday would be spent with family or friends —not in a brothel, of all places.

“It’s normal to have a wild and unbridled celebration here while the Heavenly Nest hangs above us,” she said. “At least, that’s what Suki-Garm claims. For me, this is my first time spending the festival

here. To be honest, I too am surprised that so many government figures have been invited. I wasn't aware that Bismall-Kehn was fostering such close ties with the despotate."

"Hmm."

Something about this didn't sit right with Manoli. So far, the nestmaster had always acted in a resolutely apolitical manner. Also, he had been harboring an Arkonide fugitive for weeks. Now, all of a sudden, he was sharing wine, bread, and women with the government? That seemed strange. On the other hand, there was nothing Manoli could do about it, so he focused on what was right in front of him.

"There," he said. "The mask is on."

"Thanks!"

She was about to leave the room again, but he stopped her. "Wait a moment."

"What is it?"

"I...uh..." Nervous, he ran a hand through his hair. "I have something else to tell you. My passage is arranged. Bismall-Kehn says he's taking me away from Topsid tonight."

"You're leaving us?" The Topsidan looked at him in surprise. "So suddenly?"

"Looks that way, yeah. I'm... I'm not the kind who has a way with words when it comes to these things. There's a data storage device for you under my pillow. Just a quick goodbye. And a thank-you for all your help."

Khatleen-Tarr inclined her head. "I understand." She looked like she was about to add something but cut herself off. "Take care of yourself," she said instead.

"Yeah, you too. I'll miss you." Hesitantly, he lifted his hands towards her head. "May I?"

The Topsidan looked at him questioningly. “I don’t know. May you what?”

“This,” said Manoli, then rested his hands on her cheeks and gave her a kiss on the snout.

Khatleen-Tarr blinked in confusion. “What was that?”

“A kiss,” Manoli replied. “That’s how we humans say goodbye to those we love.”

“Hu...mans?” The Topsidan cocked her head.

Idiot! he thought. After three months as an Arkonide, he just had to open his big mouth now. Fortunately, the translator hadn’t managed to convert the word into anything meaningful in her language. “That’s what the Arkonides on my planet are called. It’s just a...particular ethnic group. Nothing too important.”

“Ah.” Khatleen-Tarr lowered her chin a touch. “Do you know what we do when parting from good friends?”

“No.”

She leaned forward and laid her snout against his cheek. Her forked tongue tickled his neck as it darted out. “We take in their scent one last time. To remember them by. And to recognize them when we meet again many years later.”

Manoli gave her a wry smile. “I hope it won’t take that long before we see each other again.”

“So do I.” With those words, she left the room and disappeared along the hallway to join the party guests.

For Eric Manoli, it was back to waiting.

About an hour later, the door to his room was flung open again and Khatleen-Tarr rushed in. “Erikk-Mahnoli, you have to get out of here right now!” she cried. “It’s a trap. Bismall-Kehn means to hand you over to the despot.”

“What?” Alarmed, he jumped out of his chair. “What are you talking about?”

“I was downstairs, among the foreplay in the purple parlor, about to get my john and myself something to drink. Since the berry wine had run dry, I went down to the kitchen to get some more. Then I overheard Bismall-Kehn talking to a servant of the despot.” She paused, her eyes still wide with disbelief.

“And?” Manoli urged.

“He… He said he’d found the Arkonide who had fled from military captivity about three months ago, and that as a true citizen, he was of course ready to hand him over to the despot. But only in person. The despot would have to come here to the nest. When the man asked how Bismall-Kehn could dare to be so audacious, he told a story about how he was just an old man who wished for nothing more than to personally meet the despot once in his life.”

Manoli turned his head aside. “But that’s all a pack of lies. Bismall-Kehn doesn’t care one bit about the despot, unless he’s been lying to us this whole time.”

“I don’t know, Erikk-Mahnoli,” she replied, harried. “All I know is one thing: the despot agreed. He’s coming to the Purple Nest. And before then, you have to be gone or you’re done for.”

“You’re right,” he concurred. “But how am I supposed to do that? I’ll never get down the tower to the exit without being seen. There are far too many guests!”

Khatleen-Tarr stared at him with wide eyes. She appeared to be feverishly seeking a solution in her mind. “The Six Veils!” she suddenly cried.

“Huh?”

“The Robe of the Six Veils. We sometimes wear it during foreplay for customers who like disrobing their playthings. Come with me.”

Oh, fantastic, he thought. *Now all that's left is for us to get caught, requiring me to extend a single seductive leg to keep up my disguise for some fat Topsidian general. I wonder if a lizard would be into hairy man calves?*

He decided he would rather not think about it. Instead, he willingly let Khatleen-Tarr lead him into her room, where she stored all her outfits in a clothing nook—a sizable one, considering the ladies of the Purple Nest tended to wear practically nothing.

"Here. First, you need this." She held out a red and gold tube of material.

"And this is?"

"A makeshift tail. We'll stuff it and tie it around you. Otherwise it'll be clear right away that there's no Topsidan under the veils." She hastily began to fill the item with some of her clothes, turning it into a tapered sausage shape.

It keeps getting better and better, Manoli thought. "Maybe I should just climb out the window and abseil down," he suggested. "That would save us a lot of work, and the risk of having to walk right past the guests."

Khatleen-Tarr shook her head. "It's teeming with drivers and guards outside. You'd be caught in an instant. Now, stay still." She knelt on the floor and tied the fake tail around him.

"Admit it. You're enjoying this," Manoli muttered sullenly as he took in the absurd appendage swinging behind him.

The Topsidan looked up at him. "Not in the least," she answered seriously. "I'm just trying to save your life."

Sobered, Manoli blinked at her. "Okay, my comment was stupid. Sorry. Give me the veils so we can get out of here." He took the floor-length, semitransparent veils and started to hang over himself in a complicated pattern. "I can hardly see under these things. The eye slits are in the wrong place."

"That doesn't matter," she replied. "I'll lead you. Just take my

hand. Oh, and take this with you under the veils." She pushed something into his hand that turned out to be a beam weapon.

"Where did you get this from?"

"It's a service weapon," she said simply. "I took them with me when I 'resigned' from the army. Hopefully we won't need it, but you never know."

"All right, then." He pulled the last veil over his face. "I hope this goes well."

Naturally, it did not go well.

As soon as they had scurried out of the Topsidan's room and onto the staircase leading downwards, they heard voices. Left with no other choice, Khatleen-Tarr yanked open one of the nearby doors. The pair of hisses that Manoli heard from inside suggested they had disturbed two of her fellow Topsidans in a spontaneous tryst.

"Oh, how delightful." From the landing came the amused voice of Bismall-Kehn. "Is a Six Veils performance on the cards for tonight? What a lovely surprise you've arranged for our guests, Khatleen-Tarr."

Manoli's shoulders slumped. This escape had gone even worse than his last one. He would never be a celebrated escape artist; that much was clear. Still, maybe a little pressure could achieve what cunning had not.

He lifted the veil from his face. "Hello, Bismall-Kehn."

"Erikk-Mahnoli."

The nestmaster scrutinized him from head to toe. To Manoli's surprise, he was only accompanied by a single guard, and that guard was carrying only his shock club. *All the better.*

"You look downright charming," Bismall-Kehn continued. "But that won't be enough to get away."

“Maybe not. But perhaps this will?” Manoli pulled the hand with the pistol out from under the veils. “I’m assuming you’re not eager to find out how well I know my way around a Topsidian beam weapon.”

The Topsidan’s eyes widened, and he darted his tongue forward and backward nervously. “This is unnecessary, Erikk-Mahnoli. We’re not enemies.”

“Strange. That’s not how it sounded from what Khatleen-Tarr told me.”

The nestmaster’s gaze shot over to the prostitute and ex-soldier. “What did you hear?”

“Enough,” she said. “That you want to sell out Erikk-Mahnoli to the despot.”

Bismall-Kehn turned his head to the side, indicating the negative. “This is all a big misunderstanding. I... We can’t talk here. One moment.” He went to the door she had just tried and opened it again. A pair of hisses greeted him. “Out, both of you!” he ordered gruffly.

A moment later, a half-naked servant and an entirely naked lady, who clearly belonged to the staff of one of the guests, scamped out the door. With a bundle of clothes pressed to each of their scaly chests, the two Topsidans disappeared down the hallway in a hurry.

Manoli, Khatleen-Tarr, Bismall-Kehn, and the guard went into the room. The Terran shut the door behind them, keeping an eye on the nestmaster the whole time.

“Well? We got as far as ‘big misunderstanding.’”

“And that’s exactly what it is,” Bismall-Kehn reaffirmed. “I have no intention of selling you out to the despot. I’m trying to set a trap so that I can capture him and some of his foremost advisors and generals in one fell swoop.”

Manoli furrowed his brow, skeptical. “You can’t be serious, can you? Is that why all the important guests are here?”

“That’s exactly why. Trust me, Erikk-Mahnoli. I prepared all this long in advance. I’m one of the leading figures of the cold-bloods. Tonight is going to be a planetwide coup d’état. Taking the despot captive is only the beginning.”

“Why haven’t you ever said a single word about this?”

“Our movement wouldn’t have survived so long if we hadn’t been extremely cautious. Very few people know how well organized we really are. I couldn’t take you into my confidence. It was too great a risk.”

This revelation was quite an astonishing turn of events. But Manoli wasn’t entirely convinced yet. “Prove it!” he demanded. “If what you say is really true, then you must know what the leader of the cold-bloods is called. And I don’t mean Krhak-Hon, Zrec-Moyn, or Drmik-Zenja. I’m talking about the one whose name can’t be read or heard on any news channel. Who only insiders know.”

The nestmaster narrowed his eyes. His tongue flickered skeptically, and he appeared to be wondering what Manoli might know about the cold-bloods’ true leader. Then, however, he evidently realized that trust could only be earned with trust. “Sharp-Eyes,” he said. “That’s his name. Sharp-Eyes.”

Manoli lowered his beam weapon. “Right answer.”

“So,” Bismall-Kehn asked, visibly more relaxed now, “are you ready to help me?”

“I still see no reason why I should do that.”

“Because you owe me. Have I not been a good host for the past three months? Have I not protected you from all the dangers of Khir-Teyal?”

Manoli snorted. “If only I knew. To me, it looks like you’ve kept me locked up here this whole time so you could use me as bait for the despot tonight. How much sooner could I have left Topsid? How many ways back to my home have you kept hidden from me just so I wouldn’t disappear before your plot was ready?”

“It’s true,” Bismall-Kehn admitted. “I used you. But only because I need you. It all serves a higher purpose. It serves the well-being of all of Topsid. You must see that! And a new, more peaceful Topsid wouldn’t be good only for us. It would be just as good as for you Arkonides, because then it won’t have to come to war between our cultures. So instead of looking down at me, all insulted and arrogant, help me! If it all goes according to plan, then I promise you, tomorrow morning you’ll be on your way home.”

“All right, fine,” Manoli decided. “I’ll play along with your little game a while longer. But if your plan goes wrong, it’s every man for himself. Then I’ll be out of here as quick as I can.”

“If my plan fails, it doesn’t matter if you leave me in the lurch,” said Bismall-Kehn. “If it comes to that, everything’s lost anyway.”

12.

Victory for Terra

Terrania

January 7, 2037

Although Terrania Central Hospital, inaugurated just a few weeks earlier, was among the world's most modern institutions, the same atmosphere clung to it as to the majority of hospitals across the globe: the faintly uncomfortable mixture of forced friendliness and subtle tension. In the well-lit waiting room, which occupied the Stardust Tower's lowermost six stories, the chairs were painted green and blue, with pieces from modern painters adding colorful accents on the walls. To calm the nerves, there was a small bar with drinks and snacks.

But the only thing Bai Jun really registered was the incredibly faint smell of disinfectant—the particularly strong kind that killed the most stubborn viruses and bacteria. He couldn't help wondering if the Arkonide or Ferron data banks might have a formula for a cleaning solution that didn't smell of *illness*. That would truly be a groundbreaking discovery.

For what felt like the thousandth time, the mayor looked at the digital clock on the wall. Almost four hours had passed since his arrival. Outside, beyond the softly tinted window, the sun was already approaching the western horizon. And he still had no news of Cui's condition.

She had been shot. In teleporting to the hospital with Sid to wait for the young woman's life to be saved, he knew he must have blown off at least three afternoon meetings without excusing himself. But that didn't matter to him. He assumed Lhundup had taken care of all that. That was his job.

Bai Jun wasn't an especially religious man. As a military officer, enlightened thinker, and—on the surface, at least—a playboy, his

life had taken place far too much in the here and now. He'd had little time to think about higher powers and their influence on the mortal world. Despite that, he was praying now. He knew that this call for divine assistance was ridiculous at best, and brazen nerve at worst, since he had never made any effort to earn the goodwill of any gods or spirits before.

But that's how we humans are, after all, he thought in a burst of self-awareness. *In good times, we're self-sufficient and even laugh at pious fellow citizens. Only when we're standing at the edge of the abyss do we stretch our hands out to the heavens, seeking help.*

"It's all going to be fine," said a voice behind him.

Bai Jun jumped, startled, bordering on terrified, but when he turned his head, he only saw Lhundup, who was walking over, his shoulders slumped. His forehead wound had been stapled, but the mayor could still see dark bloodstains on the man's shirt collar and jacket. He looked like a gang of street toughs had put him through the wringer. Still, there was a cocksure glint in his eye, and his mouth was twisted into a smile.

"Have you heard something?" Bai Jun asked.

His assistant nodded. "I bumped into Dr. Haggard out in the hallway. He just gave a thumbs-up and said he'd come over in a moment."

The mayor closed his eyes for a moment and audibly exhaled. It was as if a heavy weight had been lifted from his shoulders. In theory, that was crazy: he knew that Cui had lied to him, that she had been working with Buming and her string-pullers and intentionally played up her similarity to the dead girl in Hohhot to put him off his stride.

Yet, he couldn't truly be mad at her. For some reason, he had the feeling that she was just as much a victim of circumstance as he was. Maybe it was the rude way the other woman had treated her up there in the Stardust Tower's far reaches. Or maybe he just didn't want to believe that someone so innocent could be so villainous of her own free will.

Bai Jun was pulled out of his thoughts when Dr. Frank M. Haggard entered the waiting room. The good-looking Australian doctor wouldn't have seemed out of place in an American early evening TV show. But reducing Haggard to his outer appearance—his broad shoulders and fine head of hair—meant overlooking that he was a Nobel Prize winner and had spent his recent years bringing medical care to the needy in Ethiopia.

Full of expectation, Bai Jun stood up. "Do you have good news for me?"

"I do indeed," Haggard said. "Your little Cui had some good luck after all. If she'd made it here just twenty minutes later, I couldn't have guaranteed anything. But thanks to Sid's quick intervention, we scheduled the emergency operation immediately. I'm thrilled and proud to tell you that the patient is out of the woods. She'll have to stay here under observation for a few days, but I don't see any reason she won't make a full recovery."

"That's great to hear," said the mayor. "Can she receive visitors?"

"She might still be a bit out of it from the anesthesia, but she's woken up, so I don't see any reason not to allow a quick visit. Feel free to go to her. I'm sure she'll be happy to see you. She already asked after you and Lhundup."

"Come on, Lhundup," said Bai Jun. "We don't want to leave Cui waiting."

On the way to the recovery room, his assistant asked quietly, "What will happen to Cui? Will she be punished?"

"Now's not the time for that," Bai Jun replied. "In the end, this whole affair only really affects you and me. We were deceived and put in danger. According to the law, Cui is undoubtedly guilty. But whether the law comes into play is up to us." Quietly, he shook his head, then went on. "I don't know exactly what to think. For now, I want to hear her version of the story. I owe her that much. Besides, we can't ignore that she risked her life to save mine. She may have succumbed to Buming's whisperings at first, but she clearly had a

change of heart. That says something."

They reached the recovery room, and Dr. Haggard left them alone with a friendly nod. "I have other patients to see. But I'll check in again later."

"Thanks, Doctor!" said Bai Jun. "For everything."

They found Cui on a hospital bed with a thick bandage around her chest, surrounded by devices monitoring her vitals. On a small bedside table were a glass of water and a TerraNet earplug. Aside from that, the yellow room was largely empty. A window looked out over the small square west of the Stardust Tower. Gentle sunlight shone through the drawn curtains.

"Hello, Cui! How are you doing?" Bai Jun asked, pulling up a chair and sitting down next to the girl. Lhundup stayed standing beside them.

"Not too bad." She smiled bravely. "I still feel quite weak, and a little strange. But I'm alive. And isn't that what matters most?"

"Yes, it is. You were really lucky. That shot could easily have killed you. What on earth gave you the idea to attack Buming?"

"I couldn't let her shoot you," Cui protested. "Her name's Chang, by the way. I don't know her given name. She's a former agent of the People's Republic. I think she was in the military secret service. Just like the others."

Bai Jun's ears pricked up. He hadn't actually planned to bring up these topics at all, but since Cui had touched on them, he asked some follow-up questions. "The others? How big is Chang's group? What do you know about them? And how do you fit into the picture? You can't be a former agent, right?" He could assume that much. If she had been, she would have been able to disarm Chang without taking a bullet.

"No, I have nothing to do with the secret service," Cui confirmed. "Actually, I wasn't a member of the group Chang belongs to, so I can't tell you anything about them. I'm an actor

from Beijing."

"An actor?" Bai Jun repeated, stunned. He hadn't reckoned with that—a sign of her remarkable talent. And it explained why Cui spoke and behaved with markedly more self-confidence now that she wasn't playing her role anymore. She had been the scared street kid for his benefit alone.

Cui nodded. "Yes. Chang's group took notice of me two weeks ago. They said the People's Republic needed me. I was gullible at first. I didn't realize that these people hadn't been serving the state for a long time. That they were acting on their own."

"A dissident group against the Terran Union," Bai Jun said.

"Exactly. I didn't suspect how questionable their motives might be until they told me to go to Terrania to worm my way into your confidence. Apparently, I look very similarly to a girl connected to a painful episode in your past, Mayor. Chang and her people wanted to use that pain to their advantage."

And it had worked, Bai Jun was forced to admit. Cui's arrival had thrown his life and his inner peace thoroughly off-balance, although thankfully, not enough for him to lose sight of his principles and his belief in Perry Rhodan's vision.

"When I heard what they had in mind for me, I refused. I said it didn't feel right to torment a man like that. Then, Chang kidnapped my father. She put pressure on me, said if I didn't obey, they'd kill him. And that if I told anyone, if I went to the police for help, they'd kill him then too. It would look like an accident. No one would ever connect it to them. I had to take them at their word. And even though I was horribly afraid and had a few qualms, I involved myself in the scheme. I just had to try to get close to you. No more was expected of me than that. And that's exactly what I did. I'm sorry for lying to you. You were so good to me—or rather, to the homeless street kid, Cui." She lowered her head in shame.

Bai Jun leaned forward a little and grasped her hand. "It wasn't your fault. I don't blame you. Don't worry about it at all."

The girl looked at him, hesitant. “But what’ll happen to my father now? I’m scared Chang and her people will do something to him to punish me.”

“Chang doesn’t present any danger at the moment,” said the Mayor. “She’s in custody. And the two men who infiltrated the Stardust Tower with her are dead. They lost their lives fighting tower security. But that doesn’t mean your father is truly safe yet.”

“Can’t we rescue him?” Lhundup interjected.

Bai Jun put a thoughtful hand to his chin. “I truly hope we can. I need to speak to Chang in jail. Maybe there’s a possibility—even if the price we’ll probably have to pay for it is rather distasteful.”

Someone cleared their throat in the doorway. When Bai Jun turned around, he saw Sid’s head. The young man was peering in sheepishly.

“Are we interrupting, Mayor?” asked the mutant. Behind him appeared Betty Toufry’s blonde head of hair.

“No. Come in,” Bai Jun replied as Cui picked up the TerraNet earplug from the bedside table and put it in.

The two mutants entered the room. Sid was carrying a pod. “We wanted to see how you were doing, Cui,” he explained. “And to bring you something to pass the time. A few new games.” He lifted the pod.

Cui gave him a dull smile. “Thanks! But you’ll have to forgive me. I have no idea who you are.”

“This is Sid González and Betty Toufry, two young people with special gifts,” Bai Jun explained. “I’m sure they’ll explain everything if you let them. We’re indebted to them. Not only did they help us catch Chang, they also saved your life.”

Wide-eyed, Cui looked at the pair. “In that case, thank you even more.”

“Don’t mention it,” Sid replied with a dismissive gesture. “Saving

the day is our job."

"You blowhard," Betty commented with a grin and boxed him on the arm.

Sid only laughed.

"I'll leave you kids alone," the Mayor said, standing. "I have a few things to deal with." He nodded to Cui. "I'll see to your father. I'm ready to pay the price it'll likely cost me."

"I can hardly find the words for your kindness, Mayor Bai. You're truly worth the bullet I took for you." Endless gratitude shone from Cui's face.

Bai Jun sensed a warm feeling flowing through him. "You can call me Jun," he said. "Just Jun."

The two inconspicuous civil aircraft met on a nameless airfield on the Gobi Desert's eastern edge. It was one of those moments that was suspiciously reminiscent of a Hollywood film, but whether art had imitated life or the other way around, Bai Jun couldn't say.

The two pilots remained in the twin-engine Cessna's cockpit. Bai Jun left the craft with Lhundup and two trusted soldiers. They all wore matching suits with long winter coats over them. Sunglasses to shield them from the glaring desert sun completed their wardrobes. Under the coats, they could have concealed excellent lightweight firearms. But Bai Jun and his men were in the middle of nowhere. Here, they could carry their weapons—in their case, submachine guns from Chinese military stocks—openly.

Between them walked Chang. Bai Jun's people had put handcuffs on the secret-agent-turned-dissident. In addition, she wore foot rings that unleashed painful electric shocks if the prisoner took steps that were too large. Chang knew this type of restraint and was visibly making an effort to keep her feet close together.

Dust and individual snowflakes drifted across the lonely runway. In all four directions, there was nothing to see but desert. The few

corrugated iron sheds and barracks looked abandoned; the doors stood open, the windows obscured by desert sand.

Bai Jun wondered what kind of place this was. A resting place for miners prospecting for rare ores? A smugglers' den? Or even a hidden base for the secret service, where the men and women in black had carte blanche to act as they pleased, far beyond any jurisdiction?

The last option wasn't as far-fetched as it sounded. In the end, Chang's backers had suggested this desolate point as the handover location. Bai Jun had arranged for it to be checked with a military satellite before agreeing—one more favor repaid by former army colleagues who still owed him. *It's high time to build up a few more favors,* he thought. *Otherwise, I'll eventually have no strings to pull.*

In his mind, he went through the list of exotic goods and data packets that were currently under lock and key in Terrania and that every high-ranking military officer and industrialist worldwide would salivate over. He could siphon off a few little things, he was sure. By no means was he the only one doing that among the Terran Union's leadership.

But there'll be time for that later, he admonished himself, returning his attention to the here and now.

Some distance away stood the aircraft belonging to their "business partners," a narrow, jet-black Mitsubishi with VTOL capability—in other words, the ability to launch and land vertically via thrust reversal. As of now, it was one of the most modern craft of its kind. Soon, however, its time would pass as hybrid technology blended knowledge from Arkonides, Ferrons, humans, and other galactic cultures together more and more.

Bai Jun's gaze wandered to the quartet of black-clad men standing in the aircraft's slipstream, waiting for them. Their time, too, would soon be past, he ardently hoped. But it was too early for that yet. And so, he had to meet with them here and undertake a trade that was legally questionable at the least, but morally the only option. He had to trade a confirmed terrorist for the life of an innocent man: Cui's father.

About twenty meters away from the other group, his team came to a halt.

“We brought Chang with us, as promised,” the mayor announced. “Where is Wang De Ming?”

“Here.” One of the men gave a signal to someone inside in the vehicle that they couldn’t see. A tall man who walked with stooped shoulders, with sparse hair and large glasses on his nose, descended the short staircase unsteadily. His hands were bound too.

“Good,” Bai Jun said. “Then let’s carry out the trade.”

“Agreed,” answered the man across from him. “No tricks.”

“I could give you the same warning.” He took off his sunglasses and nodded towards Chang. “Well, that’s that,” he said morosely. “I hope we’ll never see each other again.”

“Time will tell,” the woman replied with her characteristic haughtiness. She held out her hands to him. Bai Jun gave Lhundup a signal, and he removed the handcuffs and foot rings.

“Thank you,” Chang said, turning to go.

“Think about my words,” Bai Jun said in farewell. “Maybe one day you’ll recognize what’s best for humanity’s future after all.”

Chang looked at him with a narrow smile. “Think about *my* words, General. Not everyone in Terrania is your friend. The Americans are still keeping plenty of secrets.” With that, she left, and Cui’s father came over to him.

“Welcome, Wang De Ming,” Bai Jun greeted him. “You’re safe now. We’ll bring you to Terrania, where your daughter is already waiting for you with great excitement. If you want it, a new life will begin for both of you starting today. You’re very welcome there.”

Shortly afterward, both aircraft rose up again and flew off in different directions. All that remained were the desert wind, the solitude, and Bai Jun’s unspoken question as to what Chang could have meant by that warning.

13.

Guilt and Atonement

Hohhot

January 8, 2037

It was icy cold in Hohhot.

The small cemetery was at the city's eastern edge, where the slums gave way to creeping wilderness. A head-high wall surrounded the gently hilly yard, brick with small terracotta titles at the top. Embedded in it was a gate with flaking red paint. It was closed but not locked, as Bai Jun confirmed when he put a hand on the latch and pressed it down.

Silently, he walked between the small shrines where the dead's urns were housed. They were meager graves, little more than a few bricks stacked on top of one another and decorated with some sort of personal adornment. Some of the shrines were ready-to-use models made of cast plastic, as had become common in the last ten years among all those who couldn't afford anything else.

The girl's grave was made of stone, though, and a little larger than a suitcase. It was to the rear of the cemetery under a leafless tree with gnarled bark and bare branches stretching out into the cold winter air. Someone had affixed a few pink plastic ribbons. It was a peculiar image that spoke of childlike naivety but also endless sadness.

"Ying-Ying" was written on the headstone. No surname. According to the police files Bai Jun had gained access to after a few phone calls, no one had known it. The girl, a child prostitute with a criminal record comprising countless minor offenses, had always called herself simply Ying-Ying. From the files, Bai Jun had also found the cemetery her body had been taken to after the local authorities closed the case, deeming it a gang crime where she and her john had been murdered. The secret service, whom Bai Jun had

worked for at the time, had no doubt applied some light pressure.

It was all so damn long ago.

Another man would have put this deed behind him by now. Forgotten all about the girl's face. But Bai Jun had never quite managed that, and his time with Cui had reopened the old wound with a vengeance.

And so, after delivering Cui's father to safety in Terrania, he had decided to immediately set out on another journey—one of a markedly more private nature. That was why no one was accompanying him, neither Lhundup nor his guards. Only a pilot was waiting for him at Hohhot's airport.

Reckless, perhaps. After all, there were others besides Chang out there, hoping for a chance to make him pay for their defeat. But Bai Jun doubted the woman and her friends would show themselves again so quickly. Their cover had been blown. Their existence was known in Terrania now—and to the relevant Chinese agencies. They would have to take their next steps with great caution.

Besides, Hohhot was far from any of Earth's crisis zones. No one expected to find Bai Jun here. He was a nobody among millions of nobodies. The greatest danger was falling victim to a petty criminal, but they didn't prowl around graveyards in the middle of the day. And he had a pistol with him...just in case. Waiting outside the gate was also the police car that had brought him there after a generous donation to the station's coffee fund.

Silent, Bai Jun stood before the old, dilapidated urn grave. He didn't know exactly what form this encounter should take. When he had left Terrania, all he had known for sure was that he had to finally make this trip—better late than never—if he ever hoped to find inner peace. There was no excusing his actions, but he could at least try to ask for forgiveness.

He looked down at the small box he held under his left arm—a simple wooden container. He opened it and removed the small, ornate brass bowl he had spontaneously purchased in Hohhot. Carefully, he placed it in front of the grave marker. Then he got out

some incense that he had brought with him in a paper bag in his coat pocket and lit it. Fine smoke rose into the cold sky.

I'm sorry, he thought. *If I could, I'd undo what happened back then.*

For a while, he stood there in silence by the grave, his hands folded. He thought about who he had once been and how meeting Perry Rhodan had changed him into a different, better person. Rhodan might never understand how grateful he was, and always would be.

At last, Bai Jun bowed before Ying-Ying's last resting place, then turned around and went back to the exit via the cemetery's gravel path. At the gate, a man awaited him in a beige trench coat. He had turned up the collar and buried his hands in his pockets. When Bai Jun recognized the man, he couldn't keep a measure of surprise from his voice.

"Mr. Mercant, what are you doing here?"

The diminutive former Homeland Security agent and current Terran Union security coordinator left the wall behind and strode towards him. A look past Mercant showed the mayor that, unlike himself, the security coordinator had brought some bodyguards along, but they were waiting discreetly outside the cemetery itself.

"I needed a little distance from Terrania," Mercant said in a casual tone. "Being part of a world government is back-breaking work. When you're drowning in work, it's easy to overlook when your fellow man is in crisis. In a crisis of conscience, for example." He smiled.

Bai Jun furrowed his brow. "How am I supposed to take that? Are you spying on me, Mr. Mercant? I'm here for purely personal reasons. I was paying a visit to an old acquaintance."

"I'm also here for purely personal reasons. I wanted to speak with you outside the orbit of government business."

"You've come an awfully long way just for that."

Mercant shrugged. "What are a thousand kilometers in an era

when we can fly to other star systems?"

"I hope you'll forgive me for saying so, but I have no patience for those kinds of games right now. Get to the point, Mercant."

The latter shook his head with an almost regretful expression. "Mr. Bai, we've known each other for almost half a year now. And yet, you still see me as the former US Homeland Security agent. And I'll admit that until recently, I also saw you as the former Chinese army general. That's wrong on a fundamental level. Let's start again from the beginning." He held out his hand. "Hello, my name is Allan Mercant! I'm a Terran."

Stunned, Bai Jun stared at the hand offered to him. Hesitantly, he took it. "I appreciate the gesture, Mr. Mercant, but—"

"Allan," Mercant said. "Please, call me Allan."

"Very well... Allan. But you still can't expect me to believe that you came all the way from Terrania to Hohhot just to extend the hand of friendship to me."

"I can think of no better reason," Mercant replied. "That said, you're right, Jun—can I call you Jun?"

Bai Jun nodded curtly. Anything else would have been thoroughly impolite, and as much as Mercant's unconventional foray astonished him, the man gave him no reason to repel it.

"I'm here because I want to know if I can do anything for you," Mercant continued.

"What do you mean?" Bai Jun asked, startled.

"We're more alike than you think, Jun. We've both served in government organizations. In the course of that work, we were occasionally forced into questionable courses of action. And we made enemies who can try to use that against us today."

He knew! Bai Jun had no idea how Mercant had managed to find out the background behind the incident with Cui and Chang. But he should have expected it. The security coordinator was incredibly

well connected, much like Bai Jun himself.

He gave the man an acknowledging smile. “You’re right, Allan. We really are very similar. But in that case, you also know that a few ghosts of the past can’t defeat us. They might make us falter for a moment. But in the end, we’re both men of principle. Our principles give us strength and let us stand up to enemies, even ones using underhanded methods.”

Mercant smiled too. “I thought so. But I wanted to make sure. And for me, it wasn’t really about Terrania’s safety. It was honestly about you. As a general, you were great, Jun. But being mayor of Terrania unleashes your full potential. You give the people a voice, a strong shoulder to lean on, and a shining example of what it means to be a Terran. I would have hated to see you fall. So I’m glad to hear that you’re finished with your…ghost of the past. But next time…” He leaned closer to Bai Jun and lowered his voice. “Let’s combat the enemy together. Then we might not have to let people like Chang go just to rescue the father of a poor, misguided actress. So just come to me and tell me the plain truth. What else are friends for?”

Bai Jun bowed his head in a dignified manner. “I’ll keep that in mind, Allan.”

That moment was one of incredible harmony. Something old had reached a conclusion—and something new might be beginning.

Everything in the universe has a meaning, Bai Jun thought. *Nothing happens by accident.*

“Excellent,” said Mercant. He pointed towards the cemetery’s exit. “Can I take you with me to the airport?”

“Only if you’re a guest on board my aircraft on the return flight to Terrania,” Bai Jun replied amiably.

“As long as you have Budweiser on board, I’m there.”

“Let me make a quick phone call, and I’m sure that’ll be the case by the time we arrive.”

Laughing, Mercant punched him on the shoulder as the two men left the Hohhot cemetery behind them.

14.

Fighting the Despot

Topsid

The Moment Itself

They waited for the despot in a private room adjoining the Purple Parlor: Eric Manoli, Khatleen-Tarr, and Bismall-Kehn. The nestmaster was wearing his floor-length caftan of shimmering silky material in red and violet. On his shoulder sat Kikerren, staring fixedly at the door facing the hallway as if she knew exactly who was about to step through it.

Behind a second, locked door in the left-hand wall, they heard the laughter of the celebrating guests, the clinking of classes, and the clang of seductive music undoubtedly intended to spice up the atmosphere. The three who were waiting didn't feel much like partying. They were playing with fire, and the danger of burning their fingers was frighteningly great.

The door to the hallway opened and a servant poked his head in. "Master, the despot has arrived. He's downstairs in the entrance hall."

"Wonderful. He can come straight up. I'll receive him here."

"Yes, master."

Bismall-Kehn turned to Manoli. "Hide in the passage over there. I'll summon you when it's time." He pointed to a staff entrance in the room's front side, covered by a beaded curtain. "And don't worry about the people already hiding there. They're with me."

"Understood." Manoli gave Kathleen-Tarr a "fingers crossed" gesture that the Topsidan presumably wouldn't understand, then went through the curtain. It was dark behind it, and the narrow passage veered to the left before quickly ending in another door,

which was open. Manoli couldn't see into the room beyond it, however, as three fierce-looking Topsidans with brown scales stood in the doorway. Each of them carried a hand weapon like his.

The doctor nodded silently to them. They darted their tongues in and out, then similarly inclined their own heads. They were on the same side.

When Manoli turned around to look back into the room, he could see Kathleen-Tarr now lying on a couch-like item of furniture next to Bismall-Kehn, posing provocatively. Her job was to step in as a quick response force should that be necessary. The despot would see her as no more than a foolish pleasure girl. That she had military training in close-quarters combat and a weapon hidden under a cushion, he would hopefully only realize once it was too late.

Just then, the door to the hallway opened. A man in a dark hooded jacket entered. His face was half-hidden by a mask of the sort that many Topsidans from Kerh-Onf wore when visiting Khir-Teyal for the first time. He was escorted by only a single companion, who wore the nondescript suit of a mid-level official, but was in all likelihood a highly trained bodyguard.

The disguised despot pulled off his mask and hood. From under them appeared the mighty snout of a man who seemed to exude a natural authority. Cold intelligence gleamed in his small, yellow eyes. Megh-Takarr, the despot, was a former military officer who had come to power via a coup—Manoli knew that from the news—and that history was visible in the man. That didn't, in principle, make him a bad Topsidan. Power regularly changed hands in the form of coup d'états on the lizard planet. Nevertheless, Manoli took an instant dislike to him.

"Bismall-Kehn." Megh-Takarr's voice held the sharpness of a ruler used to giving orders that were immediately followed.

"My despot." The nestmaster bowed deeply. "I feel honored by your visit to my humble establishment."

"I'm not here for pleasure—in contrast to some of my officers

and council members, as I've seen. You made it known that you had something for me. Some*one*, to be more precise. An Arkonide who managed to escape my custody a short while ago."

"That's correct, my despot," said Bismall-Kehn. "I found him by coincidence a few—"

"Your stories do not interest me," Megh-Takarr rasped. "You insisted on my personal presence as a condition of handing over the Arkonide. Well, here I am. Where is my Arkonide? Give him to me so I can be on my way again. The licentious activities here nauseate me."

"The Purple Nest is a source of joy for many of your citizens. You judge me and my girls too harshly."

"And you waste my time. I have other duties to attend to."

Bismall-Kehn smacked his lips in feigned disappointment. "Very well then. Bring in the Arkonide!"

The three Topsidans aimed their weapons at Manoli. A jolt of adrenaline ran through his body.

Bismall-Kehn's sold me out after all! No, no, don't be silly. He knows Sharp-Eyes. Trust him and play along.

"Go!" said one of the Topsidans.

Manoli nodded and prayed he wasn't about to make the biggest mistake of his life. He let his arms hang by his sides and tried to look as unfazed as possible. But inside, his guts were tying themselves in knots as he stepped around the corner and walked towards the despot. The three Topsidans with their drawn beam weapons followed behind him into the room.

"Three guards?" The despot snorted with derision. "I think you overestimate this pale-skin's combat ability, Bismall-Kehn."

"The men aren't here for his sake," the nestmaster explained politely, "but for yours."

Beside him on the couch, Khatleen-Tarr suddenly produced her service weapon from under the cushion. At the same instant, the three Topsidans pointed their pistols at the despot and his companions. And Bismall-Kehn, too, pulled a weapon out of his floor-length garment.

“Treachery!” the despot roared.

And suddenly, everything happened at once. The despot’s companion raised his arm and cried a warning into his wrist communicator. One of the dissidents fired and hit him in the chest. The despot threw himself at Bismall-Kehn with a powerful leap. The latter’s beam weapon fizzed on as well, but it was deflected by a body force field that suddenly shimmered to life. Screeching, Kikerren flew into the air. True chaos reigned.

Manoli jumped behind the couch, almost colliding with Khatleen-Tarr, who was herself crossing over the backrest. The door to the Purple Parlor was blasted open, and a uniformed Topsidan, a high-ranking space fleet officer judging by his insignia, burst into the room, wrestling with a guard in sandals and a tunic. In the parlor behind them, where drinking and cavorting had been going on moments before, Manoli could see that equally intense fighting had broken out.

The dissidents might have had the advantage in terms of weapons technology. The fake security guards had drawn shock clubs and beam weapons. But they hadn’t only invited harmless desk jockeys into the building that night—they were also hosting soldiers and war heroes, who had pitted themselves against their unexpected enemies out of a mixture of bravado and fanatical loyalty. Chairs and metal sculptures were already flying through the room at the insurgents. The despot’s supporters were fighting with everything they had on hand.

“This was Bismall-Kehn’s amazing plan?” Manoli asked in disbelief. “A wild free-for-all in his own building?” He ducked as an energy beam whizzed past, barely missing them and burning the air above their heads.

“Don’t ask me. I had nothing to do with it,” Khatleen-Tarr

replied. “And I don’t care about the cold-bloods and their fight either. Right now, I only want one thing: to get out of this hatchling pit in one piece. The Purple Nest is probably the longest home I’ve ever had.” Next to them, one of Manoli’s guards hit the ground hard. His eyes stared into the middle distance, lifeless. Blood ran from his half-open snout.

“Agreed,” said Manoli.

“Kill them!” bellowed the despot somewhere beyond the couch. “Take these wretched traitors out!” His voice grew a little more distant; he had clearly moved into the Purple Parlor. Bismall-Kehn hadn’t managed to overpower him, it would seem.

“Let’s fight our way downstairs together,” said Manoli. “If we make it out of the Purple Nest, I might know someone who can help us. If he’s not making himself miserable right at this moment as well.” He was thinking of Ghak-Ruk, at Ghak-Ruk’s Sludge Pit.

“Okay.” Khatleen-Tarr inclined her head, then moved it upwards and peeked out from their cover. “It looks clear,” she whispered.

Manoli raised his head too—only to pull it down again a moment later as an energy beam whipped past them. “I thought it was clear!” he cried indignantly, certain that his heart rate had doubled.

The Topsidan snarled and returned fire before ducking. “I said it *looked* clear,” she corrected. She waited three anxious heartbeats, then braved another glimpse over the edge.

“And now?” Manoli asked.

“It looks clear.”

He sighed.

“No, I mean it.”

“Then let’s go! Time to get the hell out of here.” The shouting and weapon fire from the next room were growing more heated by the second, and it sounded like fighting had broken out in the hallway too.

They left their cover and hurried towards the slightly open door to the hallway. Everywhere in the room lay fallen Topsidans: the despot's companion, two of the dissidents, and...

"Bismall-Kehn!" Manoli realized.

The nestmaster was lying slumped against the wall by the door to the Purple Parlor. Blood was pouring from a gaping wound on his temple, and his chest bore a visible burn on his red and violet garment. Above him, on the frame of the door that had been blown open, Kikerren crouched, croaking and beating its leathery wings in agitation.

When he sensed Manoli and Khatleen-Tarr moving in front of him, Bismall-Kehn raised his head slightly. His half-closed eyes opened. "Help me... Please, help..."

The pair exchanged a glance. "We don't have time," the Topsidan woman hissed. "The despot's troops will arrive any minute. We need to get out of here."

Manoli hesitated. All reason said to ignore the injured man. He had warned Bismall-Kehn that it would be every man for himself if his crazy plan went awry. Now it had come to that, and the best thing he could do was run away. He had to go to ground on the streets of Khir-Teyal, then try to arrange his own escape from Topsid. With Khatleen-Tarr's help, he had a chance—which grew smaller with every passing second he lingered at the Purple Nest.

But Manoli was also a doctor. He had sworn an oath to help those who needed his aid. True, that had originally only applied to humans, but Topsidans, Ferrons, and Arkonides had the same right to live as any Terran. He couldn't just leave Bismall-Kehn to die.

"No," he decided. "We're going to help him. Give me cover—I'll pull him into the staff access passage. I hope there's a first aid kit in there."

"This is madness, Erikk-Mahnoli. You're endangering your own life for someone else's. For someone who used you."

“I know. But I’m a belly slicer. This is my job.”

Cursing, Khatleen-Tarr began to fire while Manoli carried out a hasty examination. From the look of things, Bismall-Kehn had only suffered flesh wounds, no broken bones. Topsidans were pleasantly sturdy. But he was in shock and needed a regenerative supplement at once.

With professional calm, Manoli grasped the wounded man under his arm and dragged him through the room to the beaded curtain. “Why the hell do you have to be so fat?” he grunted quietly as he pulled the heavy Topsidan through the curtain and along the short corridor.

There, as expected, he found a small room for staff where food and drinks could be prepared for guests in the Purple Parlor and its neighboring room. And on the far wall hung a glowing green box with a white cross on it.

“Just what I was looking for,” Manoli muttered.

“Thanks!” Bismall-Kehn murmured weakly in his arms. “Thanks, Erikk-Mahnoli...”

“Not now,” he said. “Thank me when I’ve saved you.” He raised his voice. “Bring two cushions for him, Kathleen!” Right now, he didn’t care if she thought he wanted to mate with her. He had no time for long names.

A moment later, the Topsidan appeared in the doorway, her beam weapon at the ready and the requested cushions under her arm. “Here.”

“Rest his head on one and put the other under his legs.” As he continued giving instructions, Manoli went over to the green box, tore it off the wall, and opened it. Sterile dressings, syringes filled with a regenerative supplement, wound sealants... The Topsidans had a few handy toys in their first aid kit. Naturally, he had copied all the available data about them onto the device in his breast pocket.

His interest in alien medical technology could save Bismall-Kehn's life. That, and his studies of Topsidian anatomy, were the only reason the doctor was able to treat the nestmaster. Otherwise, he would have been as helpless as a first-semester medical student.

Over the next five minutes, he treated Bismall-Kehn's wounds with quick, if not quite routine, movements. Meanwhile, the fighting continued unabated throughout the bordello. But it sounded to Manoli as if the shouting and gunfire were growing a little quieter. It seemed the struggle between the dissidents and the government-loyal guests had relocated to the lower sphere.

They were still in danger, however. The Purple Parlor was far too close by. One fleeing combatant with a weapon in his claws and a nervous trigger finger was enough to make this night even uglier than it already was. That was why Manoli stuck to the bare minimum first aid required before turning to Khatleen-Tarr, who was watching the doors with a grim expression.

"I think he's stable for now. If there are no more surprises, he should make it. That means we can get out of here."

"I don't know if that's still possible," Khatleen-Tarr murmured. She had tilted her head and appeared to be listening intently.

"What do you mean?"

"I think the despot's reinforcements have arrived."

Manoli scurried over to the door leading to the passageway with the beaded curtain and listened as well. He could make out muffled voices from the stairway barking curt orders.

He cursed. "What do we do now?"

"There's...still one way out," Bismall-Kehn wheezed, still lying on the floor. "My office. We... We have to get to my office."

"But that's all the way in the upper sphere," Khatleen-Tarr objected.

"No other options left..." the nestmaster insisted.

The woman looked at Manoli. “Well then. Let’s get moving.”

15.

Escape Into the Unknown

Topsid

The Moment Itself

Panting, Manoli slammed the door to Bismall-Kehn's office behind him. He was completely out of breath and swearing as if he had run a marathon. Why were there only stairs in these wretched Topsidan residential towers, and no elevators?

I bet Bismall-Kehn arranged it this way on purpose to keep his girls from putting on weight, he thought sarcastically. It made it all the more unpleasant to drag a well-fed man like the nestmaster up all those stairs to the top floor.

Manoli turned to face Bismall-Kehn, whom Khatleen-Tarr had just set down in a cushioned seating area. The man's green scales had a sickly gray hue now, and his breath rattled. Kikerren, who hadn't strayed from her master's side, landed on a metal bust of a Topsidan that stood on a pedestal beside the seats.

"Good... Thank you," said the nestmaster. He raised an arm and pointed to the large desk in the middle of the room. "Top drawer. A small silver box."

Kathleen-Tarr went over to the desk and pulled at the drawer. "It's locked."

"Press on the skull...of the leftmost lizard," Bismall-Kehn told her, indicating one of the ornaments on the desk, of which there were a great many.

The woman obeyed, and the drawer opened with a click. With haste, she reached in and withdrew a small box the size of a pack of cigarettes. It had a few buttons on the top and reminded Manoli of a TV remote. "This?" she asked.

Bismall-Kehn feebly inclined his head. “Now the red button,” he said.

She pressed it, and Manoli heard several locking noises from the door to the room. At the same moment, he could hear something sliding out of the floor, wall, or ceiling in the hallway with a whirring sound. An electric hum grew audible.

The nestmaster slackened with relief. “For a moment…we’re safe,” he told them. “Unless…our enemies have brought really heavy equipment with them. But I doubt…they’ll manage that right now.” He laughed, his voice choppy.

“What’s going to stop them?” Manoli asked.

“The uprising, Erikk-Mahnoli,” replied Bismall-Kehn. “The cold-bloods’ uprising…against the despot…has begun. Everywhere in the city. So Megh-Takarr’s…faithful have…bigger concerns than us.”

Somewhere in the distance, beyond Khir-Teyal, an explosion shook the night. Manoli doubted it was a wayward firework.

“You said if we came here, there was another way out,” said Khatleen-Tarr, reminding him of why they were there. “Where is it?”

“There.” Bismall-Kehn pointed towards a tall cabinet next to a window.

Manoli walked over and opened it. A harpoon-like device attached to a metal frame hung inside it. “What’s this?” he asked.

“Your way out.”

“Couldn’t you have hidden an anti-grav module in here?” Khatleen-Tarr complained.

“I could,” Bismall-Kehn replied. “But then only one person would be able to get away.”

“Do you know what we’re supposed to do with this?” Manoli asked her.

“Yes,” she said, heartily grabbing the implement and pulling it out of the cabinet. Buttery smooth and without a sound, the harpoon swung around the metal frame and latched onto a protrusion on the ground. The barrel pointed directly towards the only window in Bismall-Kehn’s office.

Khatleen-Tarr opened it. Cries and gunshots wafted up from below. The multicolored blinking of security vehicles lit the hazy night. There was another explosion in the streets of Kerh-Onf. Above it all hung the three pale discs of Topsid’s moons.

Manoli’s companion shoved the launcher forward. “Where do we aim for?” she asked Bismall-Kehn as she looked through the weapon’s narrow scope.

“Do you see the tower directly across from here?”

“Yes.”

“The middle sphere. An open window.”

“I have it.”

“Fire the harpoon that way! The apartment there belongs to me. And the building’s other occupants have been bribed. No one will ask any questions or give any answers.”

“Wonderful.” The sarcasm in the Topsidan woman’s voice was hard to ignore as she took aim. Then she fired, and with a dry pop, a matte-black cord shot out into the darkness. Manoli couldn’t hear the crunch with which the harpoon lodged itself into the adjacent building. But the shot must have hit home, because Khatleen-Tarr turned a crank and pulled the cord tight. “It looks clear,” she declared.

“Don’t keep saying things like that,” he said.

She cocked her head questioningly for a moment, then suddenly burst into hissing laughter. “You know something, Erikk? I like your sense of humor. Even in the worst crisis, you always have a joke on the tip of your tongue.”

“Eric?” Manoli raised his eyebrows. “I must be missing something here. You don’t want to mate with me, do you?”

“Mate?” asked Bismall-Kehn from his seat, confusion in his voice.

Khatleen-Tarr laughed again. “On his first day in the nest, I pulled his tail a little. He thinks people only call each other by their first names if they’re ready to mate.”

“Wait, is that not true?” Manoli asked, indignant.

“It wasn’t the *whole* truth,” his companion confessed. “But people who are ready to mate do *also* use first names.”

“Fine, then from now on, I’m calling you Khatleen!” he decided. “No, better yet: Khat! And with no desire to mate with you whatsoever.”

“Maybe you should save your bantering for later,” said Bismall-Kehn. “When we’re actually safe.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Manoli concurred. “Let’s get out of here. If only we knew where to go...”

Bismall-Kehn sat up a little. “You have to go to Sharp-Eyes,” he proclaimed. “He’s the best one to help you.”

“Sharp-Eyes?” Manoli repeated in disbelief. “The cold-bloods’ ominous leader? But where do we find him? I don’t think there’s anyone on all of Topsid who keeps himself better hidden right now.”

“Kikerren will show you,” said the nestmaster. “She knows the way.”

The flying lizard croaked as if in confirmation and nodded several times with her long head.

“Your pet?” Manoli looked at it dubiously.

“Kikerren is far more than that. Trust me, Erikk-Mahnoli.”

“Well then,” said Khatleen-Tarr. She reached into the cabinet again and withdrew two of the pulleys lying inside it, of which there were at least ten. With experienced hands, she clipped them onto the cord one after the other. “Ready for a nighttime excursion?”

With an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach, Manoli glanced at the rope setup. “Not really, but what other choice do I have?”

“That’s true.”

“Wait just one more moment before you go.” Bismall-Kehn pushed himself up from the cushions, wheezing, and hobbled over to the desk. He activated another secret mechanism and a piece of the wooden desktop slid aside to reveal a black panel. At the press of a finger, it came to life, becoming a touch-screen computer. The Topsidan entered a few orders.

“This will pinch for a moment,” he said.

A second later, Manoli flinched. It was as if someone had jabbed him in the butt with a needle. Kathleen-Tarr reacted similarly next to him.

“Ow! What was that?” he asked.

“A subcutaneous transmitter,” Bismall-Kehn replied. “How do you think I found you so quickly when you ran away five weeks ago? I don’t like losing people who are important to me.”

“Hey! I didn’t know about that!” Khatleen-Tarr said, annoyed. “How dare you.”

The nestmaster made a lip-smacking sound. It sounded dismissive. “Keep your scales on. I never abused my knowledge. It was purely a safety precaution. Khir-Teyal is dangerous territory. That’s why it’s important for me to know where I have to look if one of my people doesn’t turn up to work on time. Besides, I destroyed the transmitters just now. No one can be allowed to follow you where you’re going.”

“What’s going to happen to you?” Manoli wondered.

“I’m a man of many talents,” said Bismall-Kehn. “My greatest one may be pulling my head out of traps. I’ll make do.” He inclined his head urgingly. “Now go, before this escape route is closed to you as well.”

“Women and children first,” said Manoli, gesturing for Khatleen-Tarr to take one of the pulleys.

She slid into the harness and grabbed the pulley’s control handles. “Do you know how this works?” she asked. “Just turn the right handle; that releases the lock, and you’ll roll downwards.”

“I’ll manage it,” said Manoli as he got himself ready.

Khatleen-Tarr sat on the window ledge and swung her legs over. “Pretty busy down there,” she observed. “Thankfully, it’s nighttime and we’re a good forty meters up.”

“Did you *have* to mention that?”

“Forgive me. I won’t say anything else.” She pushed off and disappeared into the darkness with a whoosh. Kikerren followed with excited wing flaps.

Manoli put himself into position. *Don’t look down. Just don’t look down,* he cautioned himself.

In the corridor in front of the office, energetic voices grew loud. A moment later, a rapid-fire weapon began to hammer.

The doctor cast a worried look at the entrance, then at Bismall-Kehn, sitting at his desk. The master of the Purple Nest looked completely relaxed.

“I wish you good luck, Erikk-Mahnoli,” he said. “And give my regards to Sharp-Eyes.”

“I will. And all the best to you too!”

With a resolute motion, Manoli pushed himself off the window ledge and raced out into Khir-Teyal’s night.